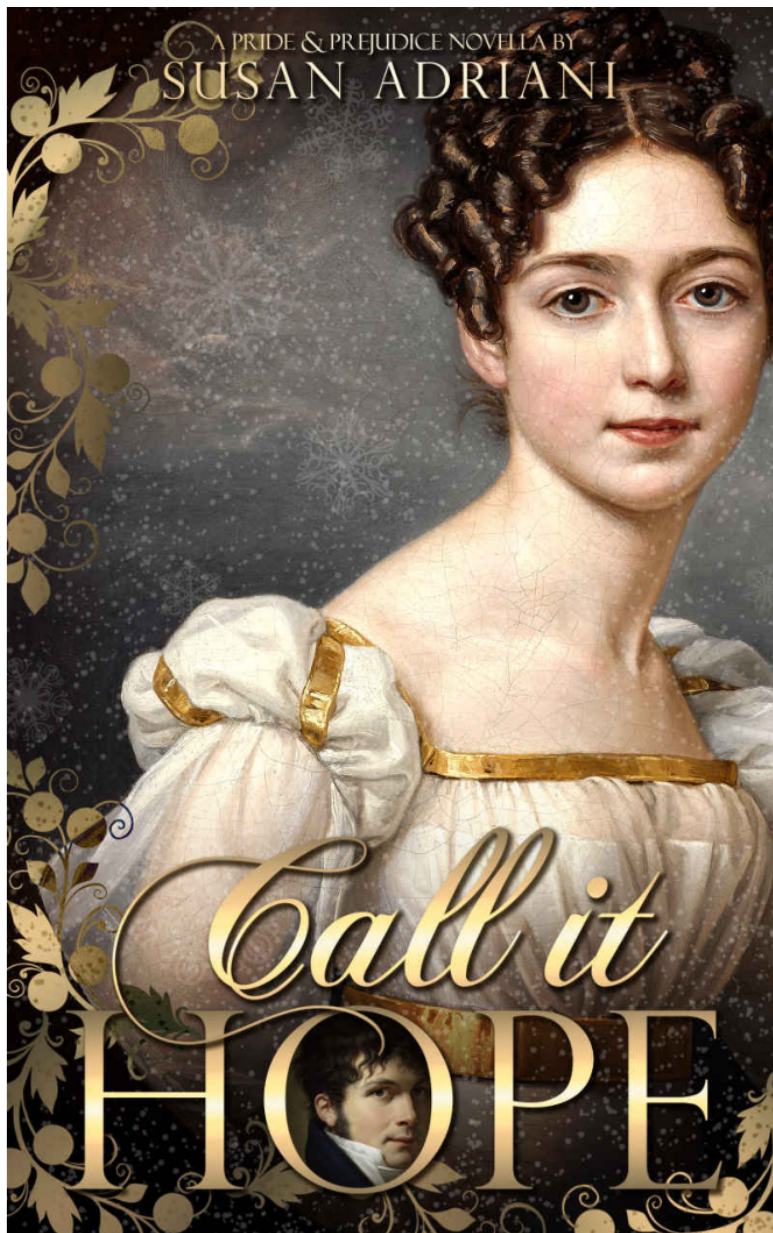


A PRIDE & PREJUDICE NOVELLA BY
SUSAN ADRIANI



Call It Hope

Susan Adriani



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*For Liam, who is new to our crazy, often incorrigible family, and more
welcome for it.*

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You want nothing but patience; or give it a more fascinating name: call it hope.

Mrs Dashwood, *Sense & Sensibility*



One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other.

Emma Woodhouse, Emma

Snow sifted down from the dreary December sky like powdered sugar, coating everything in its path with downy white. When Darcy was a boy, small, fine flakes foretold a big snowfall, especially in Derbyshire, where the winters were not only colder than those in the south, but invariably harsher as well.

If only Darcy were in Derbyshire. Instead, he was in Kent, where the climate was warmer, the snow was wetter, and his temper was fouler for being trapped within the overbearing bosom of his family. Five days before Christmas, he and his Fitzwilliam relations arrived

at Rosings Park, summoned there under the guise of some desperate scheme Lady Catherine had contrived to make his life an inconvenient hell. Had his sister Georgiana not been absolutely delighted by the prospect of their families staying on to spend the holiday together, Darcy would have quit the place at once and hied back to Pemberley, where there were pheasants to shoot and brandy to drink and no talk of carol singing or kissing boughs or Lady Metcalfe's ball.

With a long-suffering sigh, he scrutinised the park from the massive bay window in the library. Already, the ground was covered in several inches of snow, concealing the unevenness of the roads and the depth of the ruts. The temperature was dropping and soon everything would freeze, making the going not only arduous, but perilous. Darcy doubted his driver would make it as far as Hunsford Village within the next hour. Escaping to London would be impossible.

"There you are," said the exasperatingly cheerful voice of his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. "I should have known I would find you in here, seeking refuge among Lady Catherine's mouldering old tomes."

Irritated as much with his cousin's carefree demeanour as he was with being discovered, Darcy made no reply.

As was often the case, the colonel was undeterred by silence. "Escape is futile," he said equitably, stretching his tall frame upon a tufted leather couch and folding his hands behind his head. "You will not make it halfway to Bromley before your carriage slides off the road and becomes stuck in a ditch. You had better remain here."

Darcy turned his back to the window and fixed him with a dour look. "You may say whatever you like of futility. A funeral procession is more diverting than Rosings Park."

"Codswallop," declared Fitzwilliam's elder brother, Viscount Emerson, as he wandered into the room. "There are plenty of diversions to be had at Rosings."

"I defy you to name one."

Emerson smirked. "There is a chambermaid on the upper floor I found extremely diverting during my last visit. If you remove that stick from your arse for two minutes together, she may be inclined to oblige you as well—perhaps twice."

Fitzwilliam's cough did little to conceal his bark of laughter. "In my experience, properly bedding a woman takes longer than two

minutes. Whatever you have been doing, Arthur, you have clearly been doing it wrong.”

Waving a dismissive hand, Emerson strolled to the sideboard and poured himself a large glass of sherry. “When you are married to a miserable, harping shrew who reviles congress even more than she reviles having a husband, you will comprehend my haste. Until Josephine begets a son, I shall have to continue running the gauntlet. The more expeditiously I do so, the better—or so I am told by my wife.”

Darcy shook his head. “I will never understand why you were so insistent upon marrying a woman who hates you.”

Swallowing a mouthful of sherry, Emerson shrugged. “Her connexions are excellent, she is reasonably attractive, has decent teeth, and came with eighty thousand pounds.”

“And was such a sum worth the misery you inflict upon each other? You are barely civil, and you reside in the guest wing of your own home.”

Emerson raised his glass aloft. “For eighty thousand pounds, I would have married an ox and slept in the barn. Once she obliges me with an heir, Josephine and I intend to mark the occasion by thereafter residing in separate houses, preferably on opposite sides of the kingdom.”

“Where you will live happily ever after, I presume.”

“With a lovely, obliging Cyprian,” the viscount replied, then drained his glass and promptly poured himself another.

Knowing Emerson, it was entirely likely he already had a mistress installed somewhere, or at the very least had one in mind. Darcy watched him guzzle half the sherry in his glass in a matter of seconds and said, “You had better pace yourself. It is not eleven o’clock. At this rate, you will be in your cups come noon.”

“With my wife and her curtain lectures *and* Mother *and* Aunt Catherine all under the same roof, I would be a fool to remain sober. Speaking of Aunt Catherine, I suggest you start in on a bottle yourself. If you are on the cut, the old bat shall likely not want to deal with you, and your bachelorhood will remain intact, at least until you regain your sobriety. Come to think of it, avoid sobriety altogether.”

Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes. “No one is asking you, Arthur. Suggesting Darcy drink himself into a stupor is a terrible idea. Mother would be livid, and Georgiana, distressed. As for Lady

Catherine, she adores him. She barely lets him alone. If Darcy is foxed, his guard will be down, and his chances of being put in an untenable situation shall increase tenfold. Your plan is as unsound as it is idiotic.”

Darcy was inclined to agree. He did not want to be caught unaware in the lion’s den. A union with his doleful cousin would yield no pleasure, and likely no children. Unlike his overbearing aunt, he did not suffer the delusion that he and Anne were formed for each other. One only had to look at them to know they would never suit. Even so, he had attempted to broach the topic with Anne on countless occasions, but she promptly claimed a headache, quit the room, and sequestered herself in her bedchamber for days on end. Far from discouraged by her avoidance, Darcy had long hoped it was indicative of his own sentiments: that the idea of their marrying each other was so abhorrent it ought never to be mentioned.

Emerson sank onto a wingback chair upholstered with vile floral fabric. “Go ahead and stay sober, then. I was only trying to help.”

“Do not,” Darcy told him brusquely, “else I find myself leg-shackled to Anne without my knowledge and my name changed to de Bourgh.”

Wisely, Fitzwilliam changed the subject. “I do not suppose either of you have seen Stephen this morning. He was supposed to meet me at the stable to tour the park at daybreak. There is an old hedgerow along the edge of the main pasture Lady Catherine’s steward claims will need rebuilding before spring. I thought to have a look at it.”

Darcy rolled his eyes.

As a third son, Stephen’s prosperity hinged on distinguishing himself in a profession and marrying a woman with a substantial dowry. Instead of taking orders, or purchasing a commission, or finding a suitable wife, he appeared intent on distinguishing himself in other ways, all of them disreputable.

Darcy could only imagine the debauchery currently taking place under his aunt’s roof. “Why you ever thought your brother would be keen to look at a hedgerow, especially at the crack of dawn, is anyone’s guess. He was so foxed last night he could barely stand.”

Emerson frowned. “The insolent little fop is probably tugging my chambermaid as we speak. He will likely make a day of it, then take a nap. I doubt we shall see him before supper.”

The colonel ground the heels of his hands into his eyes and uttered an oath.

“He had better not wear her out,” Emerson added petulantly, swirling his sherry in an absent fashion before gulping it down. He belched loudly and wiped his mouth with the ruffled cuff of his shirt sleeve. “I had planned to pay her a visit myself later, that is unless Darcy wants to partake of her favours first.” He turned towards Darcy and said, “You could use a good tup. You are far too uptight.”

An assignation with his aunt’s chambermaid was without doubt the last thing Darcy wanted. He uttered a curt, “Absolutely not,” then strode to the hearth, propped his forearms upon the mantel, and stared fixedly at the painting above the fireplace—a landscape done by one of his long dead ancestors. The composition was well executed, but it was not a prospect he recognised as being from Levens Hall, his uncle’s seat in Cumbria, or any of their family’s other holdings. In fact, the distant hills and fertile fields put him in mind of the country around Hertfordshire, which inevitably put him in mind of Elizabeth Bennet.

Darcy ran his hand over his mouth in annoyance. That he should suddenly have the misfortune of thinking of Elizabeth in one of the few rooms of his aunt’s house she had not graced last spring while staying at the parsonage was not only inconvenient, but inexplicably painful. Eight months had passed, and still he ached for the life they might have had together had he not slighted her when they first met, or insulted her when he proposed marriage, or failed to warn her of the dangers George Wickham and his reprehensible habits posed to her sisters, her Hertfordshire neighbours, and to the world in general.

Somewhere behind him, Emerson droned on about God-only-knew-what as he poured himself his third glass of sherry and proceeded to consume it in very little time. If it were evening, Darcy would be sorely tempted to partake himself, if only to drown out Emerson’s idiotic, puffed-up prattle.

Fishing his fob from his waistcoat pocket, he consulted his watch. It was a quarter past eleven o’clock. *Will this morning never end?*

“I am out of sherry,” Emerson announced to the room. He sounded peevish and put out. “The old bat must have another decanter or two stashed somewhere. It is the only decent thing to

be had at Rosings that isn't watered down..."

Ignoring him, Darcy abandoned the hearth and returned to the window, where he braced his arm against the casement and glowered at the snow-covered park. Save for Fitzwilliam and Georgiana, his mother's family and their eccentricities were tedious. He had not been at Rosings for one full day, and already his uncle, aunts, and cousins were grating on his nerves.

His thoughts returned to Elizabeth.

From the earliest days of their acquaintance her intelligence had impressed him, her playful disposition had charmed him, and her sweetness and solicitation for those she loved had endeared her to him. Duty and his family had summoned him to Kent, but Darcy wished he had summoned the courage to go to Netherfield instead. If he were to quit Rosings tomorrow and suddenly show up on Bingley's doorstep, begging for a room, would he be welcome?

Probably not.

Knowing he would never have been able to stand opposite Elizabeth in church and feign indifference to her—or sit beside her at the wedding breakfast or watch her speak animatedly with her neighbours while she avoided conversation with him—Darcy had declined attending Bingley's wedding to Jane Bennet the previous month.

"Balls," Emerson belched as he rifled through the sideboard, complaining about Lady Catherine being so cheap as to water down all the port in Kent.

Darcy recognised the distinct clink of crystal and the tell-tale splash of liquor as it was hastily poured into a glass.

A moment later, a sputtered, "God in heaven!" rang through the room, followed by a colourful string of curses. "Sacrilege! Mothers' milk is stronger than this weak swill!"

"It is a shame your constitution is not," Fitzwilliam told his brother blandly from the couch.

"Oh, shut it," Emerson muttered crossly. "There is nothing wrong with my constitution."

"With your head, then. You have always been incomparably slow on the uptake."

"Not nearly as slow as you. It is no wonder you have yet to oust Bonaparte from power, lazing about on the couch as you do..."

Darcy rubbed his forehead with his hand and attempted to tune out their bickering. He had long considered the manners of

Elizabeth's two youngest sisters abhorrent, but they at least could claim the ignorance and caprice of youth as their excuse. His cousins were well above thirty, Cambridge educated, and had lived in the world. At this juncture, even Mrs Bennet's nonsensical observations were preferable to Emerson's insipid quibbling!

Of course, whatever Elizabeth's mother lacked in discernment, she more than made up for by setting the finest table in Hertfordshire. The same could not be said for Lady Catherine. Mrs Bennet would never dream of watering down the port or the wine or the punch at Longbourn. Her suppers were eagerly anticipated and well attended by her friends. Her cook's pigeon pie and duck ragout were legendary. Darcy could only imagine what culinary heights might be achieved with a Christmas goose.

He exhaled in frustration. As exemplary the delights of Mrs Bennet's supper table were, they paled in comparison to the delights of her second eldest daughter. Should Darcy give into temptation and travel to Hertfordshire, the reception that awaited him at Longbourn would be awkward at best, mortifying at worst. Mr Bennet would be flippant, Mrs Bennet uncivil, and Miss Mary and Miss Catherine indifferent. Would Elizabeth be flippant, or uncivil, or indifferent to him as well? Would she endeavour to speak with him as she had at Pemberley, or would she go out of her way to avoid him now? Had Mrs Wickham's patched-up marriage brought her some measure of relief, or was she angry and mortified to have such a lasting, intimate connexion to such a despicable scoundrel?

Darcy hardly knew. He knew only that his love for Elizabeth had not diminished since he had first declared himself to her in April. Meeting her unexpectedly at Pemberley that summer had only increased his desire for her, as well as his sense of what he had truly lost when she had refused him.

"Richard," Emerson whined, sounding like an errant child as he kicked the sideboard door closed with his foot. "There is nothing of use to be found in this entire cupboard, only this watered-down swill. Tell me you have a flask strapped to your hip or your horse's arse or hidden away in a hedgerow somewhere. I am not nearly as foxed as the circumstances require."

Nor am I. Darcy laid his forehead against the glass and shut his eyes. His cousin and his appalling sense of self-entitlement were giving him a headache.

"You shall have to make do without your precious sherry,

Arthur,” Fitzwilliam informed him. “Neither I nor my horse have anything for you. Go take a nap in your room and sober up before Mother sees you, or worse—your wife.”

“Damn my wife,” Emerson muttered. “Damn women altogether.” Miraculously, he did not argue—a sure sign he was well on his way to being in his cups. A moment later, the library door opened, then closed with a resounding bang as he quit the room.

Darcy opened his eyes.

Outside, the snow fell harder. The flakes were larger. The wide, manicured avenue that led to the lane that led to the parsonage had completely disappeared. Not a soul was about, not even the blackbirds. Darcy itched to don his greatcoat and forge a path through the snow-covered park until his nerves were settled and his mind was at ease; he doubted he would make it as far as the hall before Lady Catherine intercepted him. Another round of asinine castigations and impossible demands would follow. It mattered not how many times he told Lady Catherine he would not marry Anne; his aunt was not in the habit of being gainsaid. She was determined to have her way.

Resigning himself to his imprisonment, he remained where he was.

Eventually, Fitzwilliam abandoned the comfort of the couch and made his way to the window, stifling a yawn. “You are quiet. Are you well?”

Snowflakes clung to the windowpanes. They were bright and delicate and resembled lace. “Well enough,” he muttered. “It was a long, insufferable journey from Derbyshire and the coaching inns offered no peace. It is nothing a night’s repose will not remedy.”

The last time he had seen Elizabeth she had worn a pretty muslin gown trimmed with lace. He had called upon her at the inn in Lambton, his head and his heart full of her, intending to renew his addresses; instead of hearing his proposal, Elizabeth had received the most dreadful news from home and burst into tears. Though he had no right, Darcy had comforted her, but upon hearing her youngest sister had eloped with Wickham, he was too horrified and furious to remain.

He had not seen Elizabeth since.

“Are you certain you only want sleep?” Fitzwilliam asked. “If there is something weighing on you...”

“I require nothing.”

“Looking at you, that is difficult to believe. As it happens, I have a bottle of French brandy stashed in the old oak tree by the parsonage gate in the churchyard, courtesy of the Major General. If you breathe so much as one word of it to Arthur, I shall be forced to call you out. It is far too fine to waste on my brother’s indiscriminating palate.”

One corner of Darcy’s mouth lifted. “Your secret is safe with me. Should your offer still stand, perhaps I will take you up on it later—when Lady Catherine and her intolerable demands have finally driven me to my wit’s end.”

Fitzwilliam made a show of consulting his watch. “So, another hour or two should do the trick.”

“Just so.”

Tucking his watch back into his pocket, he sighed. “You are a terrible liar, you know. You always have been.”

Darcy passed a hand over his eyes. “Desist.”

“That I shall never do. Regardless of whatever Arthur accuses me of, I am a tenacious devil.”

“A Fitzwilliam family trait. Despite your tenacity, I am in no humour at present to indulge you.”

“In my experience, you rarely are, but that has never stopped me from winking all your secrets out of you in the past.”

“You flatter yourself by assuming you are privy to all my secrets. In this case, I assure you are not.”

“I see.”

Darcy felt a rush of annoyance as he wondered exactly what it was that Fitzwilliam saw. His cousin knew nothing of what he suffered—no one knew. Darcy had kept his own counsel for the past year. Not once had he breathed a single word of his ardent love for Elizabeth Bennet, nor his appalling proposal, nor the crushing weight of his disappointment at her refusal to another soul. Even now, speaking of it—any of it—remained beyond his capabilities.

His head ached. His *heart* ached. The prospect of enduring another syllable of conversation was suddenly insupportable. Darcy required peace and solitude. Neither would be found at Rosings Park.

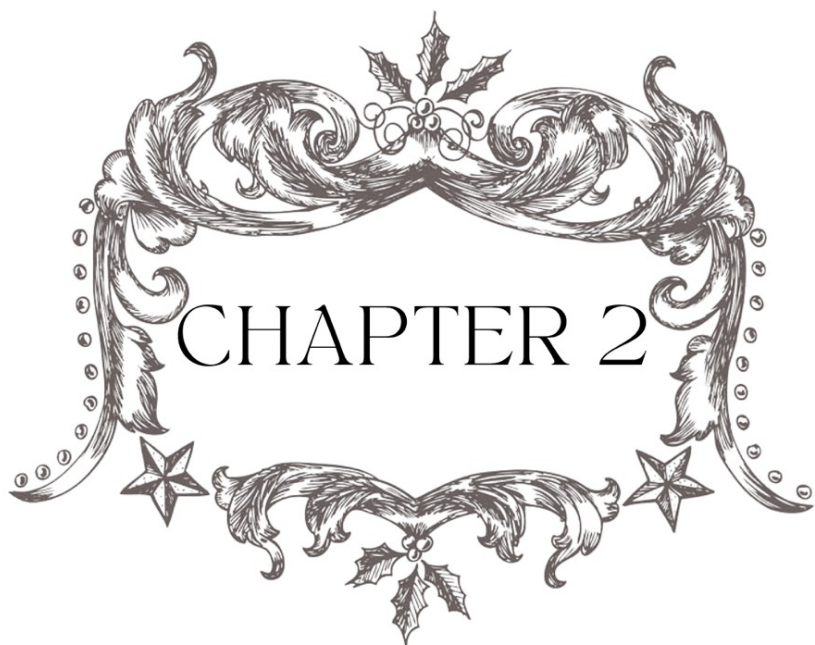
At length, Fitzwilliam ceded to his recalcitrance. “You have long desired my absence. I shall importune you no further this morning.” He turned and made to leave, but paused when Darcy said gruffly:

“My mood is beastly. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You are disinclined towards conversation at present, so I shall leave you to yourself. Should you desire a companion or a confidant, even a silent one, I am your servant.”

Darcy raised his eyes to his cousin's. “You are far dearer to me than such a statement implies. Despite my stubbornness and intractability, there is no one's counsel, no one's friendship, I value more than yours.”

Fitzwilliam laid his hand upon his shoulder and squeezed. “I know.”



CHAPTER 2

If adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Elizabeth had been in Kent for a week. She had shopped in the village. She had attended church. She had wandered through the woods and the park and the fields. She had even taken tea at Rosings not once but twice. Last evening, she had watched the convoy of fine carriages—six in total—rumble past the parsonage towards Rosings Park.

Now, all she saw was snow.

If Mr Collins would not suffer an apoplectic fit, Elizabeth would don her boots and pelisse, throw open the door, tilt her face to the

sky, and catch the cold, lacy flakes on her tongue. She longed to leave her footsteps upon the pristine, white carpet blanketing the garden, and to hear her laughter resonate through the starkness and quiet of the brisk, winter air.

The idea of receiving a harsh chastisement from her cousin for exhibiting such unladylike behaviour so close to the condescension of Rosings Park prevented her from setting foot outside the house, even so far as the front gate. The servants at the parsonage were pleasant enough, but their loyalty was to their master. Even Charlotte's position as their mistress could not command their silence and discretion. Nothing happened within the parsonage walls that Mr Collins did not eventually learn of. Elizabeth was visiting Kent for Charlotte's sake as much as for her own. She determined she would give her cousin no cause to regret her presence in his home.

The little mantel clock in the front parlour chimed half past four o'clock. Soon the encroaching darkness would envelop the surrounding landscape, and travel between the village and the parsonage would be impossible, especially in Mr Collins's gig. Laying her needlework aside, Elizabeth rose from her comfortable chair by the fire and walked to the window. The lane was no longer discernible, nor the road, nor the path from the front garden to the door. An impressive amount of snow had fallen throughout the day. Even now, it seemed unlikely to let up anytime soon. Elizabeth expelled a weary breath. Charlotte and Mr Collins would not return that night.

She had started to turn away from the window when sudden movement near the churchyard gate caught her eye. Pressing her nose to the glass, she strained to better see the figure of a man striding through the snow towards the old oak tree in the waning light. He raised himself up on his toes and reached into the hollow, drew forth an object, and tucked it into his greatcoat pocket. It was then he happened to glance at the parsonage.

Elizabeth recognised him at once: Colonel Fitzwilliam.

So relieved was she to see a friendly face, she found herself throwing open the window without thought or care and calling to him, "Good evening, Colonel! Will you not come inside on this cold evening and warm yourself by the fire?"

"Miss Bennet!" he cried cheerfully, if not a tad bit sheepishly, and set off at once towards the house. "I had no idea of your being

in Kent. Pray close the window or you shall take a chill. I will join you directly.”

Elizabeth shut the window, secured the latch, rang for a fresh pot of tea, and stood before the fire in anticipation of her visitor. While she was not averse to solitude, neither was she a sedentary creature. Company—especially amicable company—was very welcome after passing the entire day alone.

Soon, the bell sounded, the maid answered the door, and Colonel Fitzwilliam was divested of his greatcoat and shown into the parlour with the tea things. Elizabeth curtsied, but instead of issuing a formal bow, the colonel crossed the room, clasped both her hands, and greeted her with all the fondness and familiarity of a dear friend. “Miss Bennet, I cannot imagine a more pleasant surprise than meeting with you in the middle of all this bothersome snow! I trust you are well.”

“I am very well, thank you, Colonel. I hope you will forgive my appalling lapse of manners. I confess I was so surprised and pleased to see you that I gave no thought at all to propriety! It is very good of you to oblige me by paying a visit at such a moment. The weather is frightful!”

The colonel laughed. “Very frightful, indeed! But surely, you and I need not stand upon ceremony.”

Elizabeth smiled. “No, I daresay we need not.” She indicated two chairs by the fire. “Will you not be seated?”

“I thank you,” he said as she assessed the strength of the tea. “How are Mr and Mrs Collins? Will they be joining us? I should like to pay my respects.”

“They were very well when I last saw them, sir, but you find me quite alone this evening. Mr and Mrs Collins went into the village early this morning before the weather turned to assist a family much in need. I fear there is no chance of their returning tonight.”

He frowned. “You are alone? With only a few servants for company?”

“So, it would seem,” she replied, handing him a cup of tea.

His forehead creased as he accepted it. “You cannot possibly remain here, Miss Bennet. An unmarried gentlewoman without protection—and in such wretched weather as this! It is neither prudent, nor proper.”

A flush of heat suffused Elizabeth’s countenance as she prepared her own tea. “I appreciate your concern, but I will manage well

enough until Mr and Mrs Collins return tomorrow. The house is cosy and warm, and the weather, as you said, is so unpleasant no one save for yourself is about, not even Lady Catherine's woodsman."

"Assuming the Collinses are able to return tomorrow. The road to the village is buried by more than half a foot of snow! It could be days before the way is passable." He lowered his voice and glanced towards the door. "Can you say with any degree of certainty Mr Collins's servants are trustworthy? Would they keep you safe—would they protect you from harm at all costs?"

The colonel's words were sobering. For most of the day, Elizabeth's sole concern had been for her friend's safety; now, she felt a sharp prick of concern for her own. She doubted either of Mr Collins's servants would do more than was required of them under the circumstances.

As much as she hated to admit it, Colonel Fitzwilliam was correct—being an unmarried lady, snowbound and alone save for two servants she did not know well and who owed her no fealty, was not an ideal situation in which to find herself. She licked her lips and said, "Be that as it may, I am far from home, sir. There is nowhere else for me to go."

"Nonsense," he insisted. "You must allow me to bring you to Rosings. There, you will find friends in abundance, and all the comforts of home."

Had Mr Collins not apprised her—repeatedly and in the most vociferous terms—of Lady Catherine's condemnation of Lydia's elopement and her indignation towards Mr Bennet for receiving the newlyweds at Longbourn, Elizabeth might have agreed. As she would be visiting Kent for a month complete, Elizabeth preferred to avoid incurring further censure. Thus far, she had been successful. Holding her tongue for an hour while Lady Catherine instructed her on proper comportment was easy enough; it was quite another matter to be expected to do so for an indeterminable length of time. "While I appreciate your concern and your generosity, Colonel, I would never dream of trespassing upon Lady Catherine's hospitality. I could not possibly impose upon her household when she already has guests to entertain."

Taking a sip of his tea, the colonel waved a dismissive hand. "It is no imposition at all, I assure you. Her ladyship's guests comprise an informal family party—namely my own dear relations. Certainly,

I need not remind you how my aunt enjoys being of use to her neighbours! A gentlewoman of her acquaintance spending the night in an empty house is not to be borne, Miss Bennet. If I were to return to Rosings without you, there would be no escaping my aunt's displeasure."

Elizabeth, however, knew better. Clearly, Colonel Fitzwilliam knew nothing of her sister's infamy and her family's narrow escape from scandal. For that, she supposed she ought to be grateful to Lady Catherine. "Be that as it may, I am afraid I must decline."

Frowning, he set his teacup and saucer on the table, propped his forearms on his knees, and linked his fingers together. "While I own my aunt can be difficult and even unpleasant on occasion, no one currently in residence at Rosings will be easy knowing you have been left to shift for yourself. Neither would Mrs Collins for that matter. You are her dear friend. She could not possibly be satisfied with your remaining unprotected and alone in her absence. You must reconsider."

Elizabeth could well imagine Charlotte's concern for her, but Mr Collins would not want her to remove to Rosings and impose upon his patroness. "I am sorry, Colonel, but I cannot."

He regarded her with an inscrutable expression.

Like a child caught with her hand in the sweet jar, Elizabeth felt the urge to squirm under his unrelenting gaze. What was she thinking, throwing open the window and inviting him in? Since when had her comportment disintegrated to such a degree that she suddenly behaved as Lydia would, or Kitty? Mr Collins would learn of the colonel's visit—there was no avoiding that—but she hoped to keep the manner with which her impromptu invitation was issued to herself alone. She raised her teacup to her lips and silently berated herself for her thoughtlessness.

In the stillness of the room, the colonel's voice rang with an unmistakable air of authority. "It appears, Miss Bennet, you have left me no choice. Despite the seriousness of your present situation, you are determined to remain in the parsonage alone and unprotected. As a gentleman, I cannot accept that, and neither shall Darcy. Once he learns of your presence here—and your circumstances—he will likely set out from Rosings to fetch you himself, regardless of your stubbornness. So, you see, madam, your protests shall come to nothing. In the end, Darcy will insist upon having his way. We will see you at Rosings tonight."

Elizabeth heard nothing beyond Darcy's name. "Is Mr Darcy at Rosings?" she enquired in a slightly breathless voice. It was by sheer luck alone that she managed to maintain her grip on her cup and saucer. Both were quickly set upon the table. Claspings her hands on her lap, she endeavoured to calm her racing heart.

If only Darcy would come for her, but that had already proved an impossible hope. Elizabeth had waited months in anticipation of his return, only to be bitterly disappointed. No. Whether he was at Rosings or Pemberley or on the moon, Darcy would not come for her—not now that she was tied to a man he hated. He had not even come to Hertfordshire when Mr Bingley had married Jane.

The colonel smiled, seemingly oblivious to her distress. "Yes, Darcy is here, but I cannot say that he is pleased about it! He has had a bee in his bonnet since we arrived yesterday evening and Lady Catherine had the audacity to..." But whatever her ladyship had the audacity to do would remain a mystery. Chagrined, Colonel Fitzwilliam quietly cleared his throat. "Forgive me. I suppose the less said of my aunt's business with Darcy the better. In any case, I would wager a vast deal that seeing you again will improve his spirits tremendously."

Elizabeth sincerely doubted that would be the case, especially if Darcy currently found himself at odds with his aunt. "I cannot imagine our meeting would have such an effect upon Mr Darcy at present. I fear you mistake the matter, Colonel."

"Not at all, Miss Bennet. You and Darcy are old friends. He will be pleased to see you—beyond pleased. His sister, Georgiana, is also at Rosings. I believe you and she are acquainted as well."

"Yes," she admitted. "We met last summer when I visited Pemberley with my aunt and uncle. I found Miss Darcy to be a delightful young woman."

"Georgiana had much to say in your favour as well. No doubt she will enjoy renewing your acquaintance. I understand her disappointment was considerable when you left the country so unexpectedly."

With startling clarity, Elizabeth recalled the dark, agitated look on Darcy's countenance after she had revealed the whole of Lydia's impropriety to him in a moment of acute distress. He had all but leapt from his chair and paced to the window. His voice, as he demanded what had been done to attempt to recover her, was harsh. Just as she had that day in Lambton, Elizabeth averted her

eyes to her lap and smoothed an imaginary crease in her gown. "I was very sorry to have disappointed Miss Darcy, but our leaving was unavoidable. Urgent family business called us back to Hertfordshire."

"And Darcy left for town soon after. The next day in fact. Georgiana was left with none but Bingley and his sisters for company, poor girl!"

"I am very sorry to hear that," she said, striving to keep her voice steady. "Miss Darcy must have felt her brother's absence keenly. From what I have witnessed, Mr Darcy's devotion to her is considerable, and her attachment to him as great. I imagine only the most pressing business would summon him from Miss Darcy's side at such a time."

The colonel scratched his head. "Indeed. It is unlike Darcy to leave Georgiana so suddenly, and even rarer for him to abandon her to the whims of his guests—especially Bingley's sisters! In any case, that is neither here nor there. We can speak further on the subject once you are settled at Rosings. I shall even give you leave to question Darcy about the business yourself if you dare, though I cannot guarantee he will be in any mood to explain himself tonight. He has had a particularly stressful day. My aunt, as you know, is determined to have her way in all things. I fear she has tried Darcy's patience exceedingly."

Hearing Darcy's temper had already been tried to its limits did nothing to ease Elizabeth's mind. He had been all that was gracious and welcoming when they had met at Pemberley; but Lydia—thoughtless, stupid Lydia—had not yet eloped with Mr Wickham, nor had Elizabeth been irreversibly bound to him through her sister's marriage—a marriage she had since learned had been orchestrated and financed, not by her Uncle Gardiner as her family had been led to believe, but entirely by Darcy.

Despite all he had done for her family, Elizabeth knew that if they were to meet again now, Darcy's black mood would only worsen. He had not, as she had so fervently hoped, come to the aid of her most foolish sister because he loved her still, but because he had failed to divulge Wickham's disreputable tendencies to the world. And because he had felt a heavy responsibility and a deep sense of duty to right that wrong.

Elizabeth was appalled to realise she was close to tears. Not wishing for the colonel to notice her discomposure, she turned her

attention to the tea things and busied herself with refilling her cup. By the time she added cream and sugar and had taken a fortifying sip of tea, she had begun to feel mistress of herself once more, enough to say, "My removing to Rosings is unnecessary, Colonel. My cousin would not wish for me to impose upon your aunt, especially while your family is visiting for Christmas. In deference to his wishes, I shall remain here until he and Mrs Collins are come back. It is but one night. Their absence cannot be for long."

Giving her a stern look that brooked no opposition, Colonel Fitzwilliam shook his head. "That I cannot sanction, Miss Bennet. The weather is worsening as we speak. The longer we tarry, the less likely we are to have an easy journey, and I refuse to leave you alone with naught but the servants." He stood and extended his hand to her with the obvious intent of hastening her compliance. "I trust you will order your maid to pack your things while I return to Rosings and fetch the sleigh. I know you are fond of walking, but there is no chance of your walking all the way to Rosings in such weather. I will not take no for an answer. I will not abandon you, nor leave you without protection while your relations are from home. Either you come to Rosings, or I shall be forced to spend the night in this parlour arguing my point until you see reason."

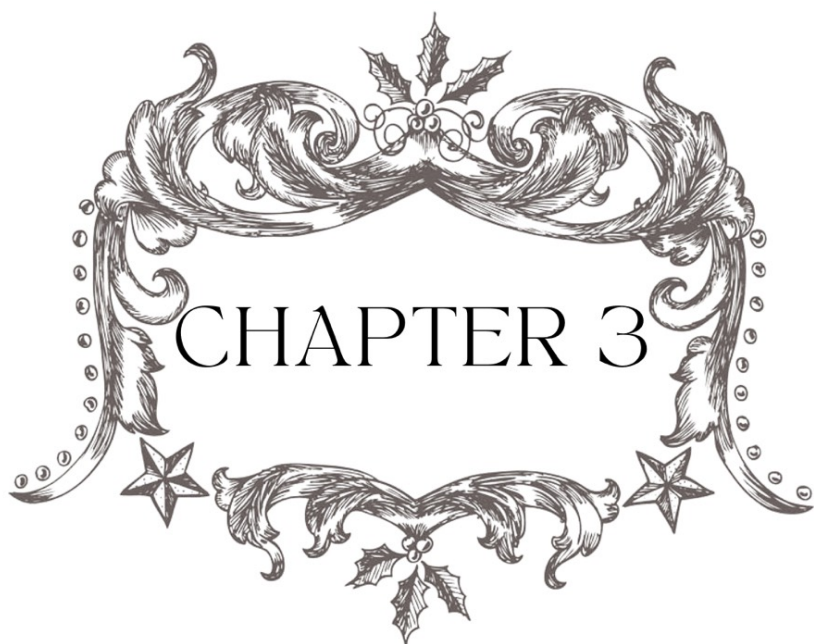
Annoyed by her predicament and unable to see a way out of it, Elizabeth glanced helplessly at the window, where darkness had settled like a shroud over Hunsford. Beyond the curtains, she could discern nothing but a wall of blackness and falling snow.

She sighed.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had fought on the Continent. He had faced Bonaparte's army not once but twice. Clearly, he was unused to yielding to even the fiercest opposition. Unless she was prepared to argue with him until morning, there was nothing for her to do but capitulate. Pushing her frustration aside, she placed her hand in his and he assisted her as she rose from her chair. "Very well, sir. When you return, I will accompany you to Rosings. I thank you for your concern and for your gallantry."

He bowed to her. "You are most welcome. I will return for you within the hour. I will also recruit a chaperon. Darcy would never forgive me if I did not take prodigiously good care of you."

Elizabeth coloured deeply but made no reply, and the colonel took his leave.



Time will generally lessen the interest of every attachment not within the daily circle.

John Knightley, Emma

“No,” Lady Catherine snapped at a harried looking servant. “Not the turnips, the potatoes! Leave the turnips where they are and fetch the potatoes at once. The potatoes must take their proper place beside the pickled eggs, otherwise the entire table will appear unbalanced. I cannot countenance having an unbalanced table and neither can Anne...”

Darcy rolled his eyes and reached for his wineglass. He doubted Anne was presently in any state to countenance anything. Should she manage to hold a fork correctly, he would be amazed. Anything

more complicated was likely beyond her.

"Anne looks becoming this evening," her mother said to Darcy, "does she not?"

Anne looked drunk. He took a measured sip of watered-down wine and ignored her.

Across the table, Stephen snorted into his soup. He looked like hell.

Lord Carlisle scoffed. "The girl looks half in her cups, Catherine!"

"Henry," his wife hissed. "Do not start!"

Lady Catherine glared at him. "Anne is fatigued," she said with a disdainful sniff. "She has had a taxing day."

"She is drunk," the earl insisted, slapping his hand on the table for emphasis. "Drunk! Look at her, for God's sake. She has barely done more than blink since she stumbled into the dining room!"

"You are mistaken, Brother," said her ladyship coldly. "As usual." She spied another servant placing a heaping platter of mutton on the opposite end of the table and cried out, "You there! What do you think you are doing? Take that mutton away at once. It is dreadfully undercooked."

"Undercooked," Emerson muttered in annoyance. "The entire sheep is practically burnt to a crisp. We shall starve at this rate." He tossed his napkin onto the table, then reached for the decanter of wine, yanked the stopper off, and sniffed it. "Bah! Watered down, as usual...What a blasted waste." Despite his complaining, he poured a healthy measure of diluted wine into his glass and swallowed it down, then proceeded to pour himself another.

Emerson's wife, Lady Josephine, eyed her husband as distastefully as she had the platter of charred mutton. She looked as though she wanted to throw the entire haunch at his head.

"Darcy, where is Georgiana? Why has she not come down to dine? Is she indisposed?"

"To my knowledge," he said to Lady Catherine, "Georgiana is in excellent health." At least she had been when he had last seen her—donning her pelisse and fur muff as Fitzwilliam ushered her from the house with a cryptic smile on his face.

"This is most distressing!"

Darcy shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to his soup, the most palatable offering on the table. *When Fitzwilliam returns, I shall beat him within an inch of his life for abandoning me.*

Then I will walk to the churchyard, retrieve his excellent brandy, and drink the bottle dry.

“You know, if you had a wife—you know if you were married to Anne—you would not have to concern yourself with such things as indisposition. Anne would take Georgiana in hand—she is infinitely capable in that regard. I can think of no better sister for Georgiana and no better mistress for Pemberley. Anne will make you an excellent wife.”

Regretting he did not take his supper in his rooms, Darcy exhaled in frustration and glanced furtively at Anne. For the moment, she remained upright, but appeared utterly transfixed by her reflection in a soup spoon. He had hoped he would find her reasonable for once; that he could speak with her seriously, present a united front against her mother, and put an end to this nonsense about a supposed engagement between them once and for all. Clearly, now was not an opportune moment.

“Anne,” said her mother, “you will wear your gold silk with the olive embroidery to Lady Metcalfe’s ball, and your cream silk with the pearl beadwork for your wedding. As Pemberley’s future mistress, you ought to wear something befitting your station when you and Darcy exchange your vows in church.”

Anne barely batted an eye, but Darcy’s temper flared. “You speak out of turn, madam. As I have told you repeatedly since my arrival, I have no thoughts of matrimony at present.”

“Nonsense!” Lady Catherine insisted. “You are nearly nine-and-twenty. It is time for you to do your duty and marry Anne. It is my dearest wish, as well as your mother’s.”

“But it does not follow it is mine.”

“Your engagement has been well-known within our family for years! You must honour it! Cannot you see how Anne desires nothing more than to be your wife?”

In unison, all in the room turned to look at Anne.

“Tell him, Anne,” her mother demanded. “Tell Darcy it has long been your dearest wish to marry him!”

Anne blinked at Lady Catherine for nearly a minute before slowly shifting her gaze to Darcy. Her complexion was heightened. Her eyes were glassy and round. “Darcy,” she said in her soft, unduly serious voice. “It is my dearest wish to marry Jack Hastings. He is an excellent kisser.” She giggled, then laughed outright as she slid from her chair onto the carpet.

Lady Catherine gaped at her in furious disbelief. She opened her mouth but was unable to utter more than a monosyllable before slumping forward into her soup.

Lord Carlisle turned to his wife in astonishment. "Who the devil is Jack Hastings!"



* * *

Darcy raised his wineglass to his mouth and drained the contents, then reached for the decanter to refill his glass. Over the last hour he had imbibed more than usual, yet, because of his aunt's penchant for diluting her liquor until it was worthless, remained infuriatingly sober.

The knob on his bedchamber door turned, then rattled, but the lock held firm. Darcy took another drink as the fire crackled and popped in the grate, sending a shower of bright sparks up the chimney.

"Darcy," said Fitzwilliam's muffled voice through the door. "Let me in."

Grateful it was not his uncle come to speak to him about Anne, he set his glass aside, rose from his chair, and crossed the room. After that ridiculous farce of a dinner and all it entailed, he had earned something stronger than watered-down wine. He turned the key in the lock and opened the door. "I am glad to see you are still in one piece," he told his cousin dryly. "You have been gone for hours."

Fitzwilliam smirked at him from the hall. A kissing bough was suspended from the ceiling above his head, likely at the behest of Lady Catherine. "Do I not get a kiss? A token of appreciation for venturing forth on such a cold winter's night?"

Rolling his eyes, Darcy waved him inside. "Please, no patronising remarks tonight. The entire day has been a misery." He shut the door and secured the lock. "You missed dinner by the way."

After divesting himself of his greatcoat and discarding it on a chair with his hat and gloves, Fitzwilliam surrendered the bottle of brandy. "I guessed as much. How was it?"

"A bloody nightmare," Darcy replied as he examined the bottle. "The mutton was overcooked, as were the potatoes, but the soup was decent. Anne, believe it or not, was completely foxed. Undeterred in the least by her daughter's insobriety, Lady Catherine persisted in promoting a union between us. We argued. Then Anne professed a desire to marry Jack Hastings instead."

"Jack Hastings," Fitzwilliam repeated incredulously. "You mean 'Handsome Jack'—the groom?"

"One and the same. Apparently, I am a dreadful cold fish, and Hastings is...the less said about what Hastings is the better."

"I suppose the whole family was present to bear witness to this spectacle?"

"And the servants," Darcy replied darkly. "I have never seen your father so livid, not even when your brother smuggled that courtesan into the house while the archbishop was taking tea in the drawing room with your grandmother."

"What of the others?"

"Your mother," said Darcy as he wiped sediment from the bottle and removed the cork, "was appalled. Lady Josephine was scandalised. Emerson was nonplussed, and Stephen laughed so hard he choked on a pickled egg. He was quickly set to rights with what appeared to be the entire contents of his hip flask. Had your father not been occupied with dismissing the servants, he would have boxed his ears."

Sighing, Fitzwilliam rubbed his brow. "He turned up. That is a small sort of accomplishment, I suppose."

"He looked completely disreputable and smelled even worse." Darcy retrieved two snifters and poured a generous helping of brandy for his cousin, then another for himself. "Thank you for indulging me."

Accepting his glass, Fitzwilliam raised it aloft and clinked it against Darcy's. "As I told you earlier, I am your servant. You have had a trying day."

"To say the least." Darcy took a measured swallow and savoured the rich, complex palette of flavours. The brandy was, in one word, exquisite. "How is Georgiana? I trust she is well?"

"Perfectly well," Fitzwilliam replied, "but you have yet to say

anything of Lady Catherine. I imagine she was distressed by all that occurred, not to mention furious.”

Darcy snorted as he absently swirled the amber liquid in his glass. “She fainted. The apothecary was called as a precaution. He is examining her now, but I doubt there is anything the matter with her. Once she regained consciousness, her first order of business was to resume her demands that I marry her daughter and save the family from scandal.”

Fitzwilliam stared at him with something akin to alarm. “I certainly hope you told her no.”

Darcy scoffed. “Of course I told her no. I had no interest in marrying Anne before—do you honestly think I would take her to wife now, after she has possibly lain with a groom?”

“I hardly know. You and your damned sense of familial duty...”

“I cannot possibly marry Anne,” Darcy told him firmly, raising his glass to his lips and swallowing a large mouthful of brandy, “not now, or ever. This brandy is exceptional, by the way.”

“I should hope so. I had a devil of a time getting it into England.” Fitzwilliam took a generous sip from his own glass, then grinned. “I nearly forgot! You will never guess who is in Kent.”

Darcy settled into a chair by the fire and crossed his ankles. “You had better tell me. Or not. I cannot say I particularly care at this point.”

His cousin claimed the chair opposite with a look that clearly communicated his belief that Darcy would care very much. “The delightful Miss Bennet.”

Darcy’s glass was halfway to his mouth. He lowered it. Hearing Elizabeth’s name was enough to make his pulse pound. That she was here, in Kent, was as incredible as it was inconceivable. “Miss Bennet is visiting the parsonage?” By some miracle, he managed to keep his voice even.

“She was. Now she is here, at Rosings. Installed in the bedchamber beside your sister’s, to be specific. She is settling in as we speak.”

Suddenly, the room felt too hot, too stuffy, and much too small. Darcy drained his glass and quickly rose to refill it. The bedchamber Miss Bennet was supposedly settling into was one he knew well. He had stayed in those rooms on countless occasions when Georgiana was a young girl and prone to having nightmares. He had slept in that very bed. Now, according to his cousin, Elizabeth would as

well. He poured another measure of brandy into his glass and resisted the urge to gulp it down as he would a glass of water. As composedly as possible, he asked, "Why is she here?"

Fitzwilliam smirked at him. "Miss Bennet could hardly be made to sleep in the stable."

"Pray be serious. That is not what I meant."

"To my knowledge, the Collinses went into the village on a charitable mission this morning, where they were detained by the weather. As they took his gig," Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes, "they cannot return until the roads are passable. Save for two servants she barely knows, Miss Bennet found herself alone. Because I like her, and because it is the right thing to do, I insisted upon bringing her to Rosings for safekeeping. If you want to know why she is presently in Kent, I cannot say. You will have to ask her yourself."

Darcy stared at the glass in his hand with a grave countenance. The only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire. In that moment, he felt myriad emotions. He was thrilled, terrified, hopeful, and unnerved in equal measure, but he was also baffled. Why was Elizabeth not spending Christmas at Longbourn, or at Netherfield with the Bingleys? What could possibly have brought her to Hunsford? Mrs Collins was a dear friend, but there was no one in the world Elizabeth loved more than her eldest sister. When Mrs Bingley had fallen ill at Netherfield more than a year ago, Elizabeth had walked three miles in the aftermath of a rainstorm to nurse her. Darcy could not imagine her choosing to spend Christmas with the Collinses when Jane, her parents, and her two unmarried sisters were all in Hertfordshire.

"Have you nothing more to say on the subject?"

Darcy started at the sound of his cousin's voice. He had forgotten Fitzwilliam was even in the room. Setting his glass on the table, he walked to the hearth, where he drummed his fingers on the mantel. Finding no answers there, he strode to the window, where he pushed the drapes aside and propped his hands on his hips. The view afforded him nothing but darkness and falling snow.

"Darcy," his cousin prompted. "You are not unwell, surely?"

"I am perfectly well, only distracted."

"So I see. I had thought the prospect of renewing your friendship with Miss Bennet would please you. I cannot ever recall seeing you so smitten, so utterly charmed by a woman. I felt certain that you liked her more than any other lady of your acquaintance."

For the briefest moment, Darcy shut his eyes. He was so far beyond liking Elizabeth Bennet at this point it was absurd to pretend otherwise. His love for her was as immovable as it was constant, much like his regrets.

And she was here, now, at Rosings.

Darcy repressed an oath. How in the world was he to face her, after all that had come to pass, with any degree of equanimity? What could he possibly say to her that would ever make amends for Wickham seducing her fifteen-year-old sister? Even if Darcy did devise an appropriate apology, would Elizabeth wish to hear it? There was no privacy to be had at Rosings Park, and certainly no peace. His family would be present for every look, every breath, every moment of awkwardness and discomfiture between them. Lady Catherine was already displeased with him, but with Elizabeth in residence, she would become even more so. At best, she would demand his attention until he lost both his temper and his sanity. At worst, she would direct her vitriol towards Elizabeth with the express intent of reminding Darcy of her perceived inferiority in relation to Anne's. Anne, who, in a drunken stupor, claimed she wanted to marry a groom!

Across the room, Fitzwilliam shifted in his chair. "You are in love with Miss Bennet," he said with certainty. "That much is obvious. What I cannot understand is why her being here distresses you. Surely, after all this time—"

"It is not so simple," said Darcy, turning his back to the window. He shook his head with a self-deprecating twist of his mouth. "I will not insult your intelligence by denying that I do, in fact, hold Miss Bennet in a tender regard, but there are circumstances of which you are unaware. Circumstances that have likely altered her good opinion of me forever."

"What circumstances?" his cousin asked, wearing an expression of puzzlement as he leaned forward in his chair. "Of what do you speak?"

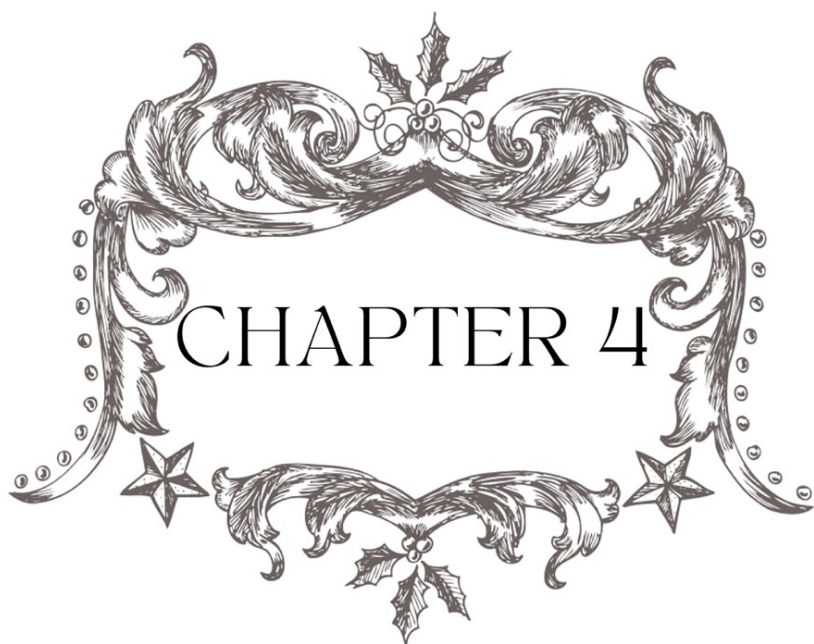
Darcy ran his hand over his mouth. Any explanation he thought to make died on his tongue. He dared not utter Wickham's name. It would likely choke him.

Taking pity on him, Fitzwilliam set his glass on the table, abandoned his chair, and crossed the room to stand beside him. "I do not say this to pry, or to force your confidence, but you must bring under regulation whatever it is that has you twisted up in

knots. Whatever circumstances have created this gulf—be it real or perceived—between you and Miss Bennet, you must either confront them, or make your peace with them, but you cannot continue as you are. If you do nothing, you must know you will regret it—that you will regret *her*—for the rest of your life.” He laid a hand on Darcy’s shoulder. “Come,” he said, and urged him back towards the fire. “Have some more brandy and tell me about Miss Bennet.”

Together, they finished the bottle.

With Fitzwilliam’s prompting, Darcy talked for half the night.



One man's style must not be the rule of another's.

Mr Knightley, Emma

“Do you approve of your rooms, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth offered Miss Darcy a diplomatic smile. “Lady Catherine has certainly gone to great lengths to ensure her guests are surrounded by every imaginable comfort. I daresay I shall sleep quite soundly tonight in such a stately bed.” It was the best she could manage. In truth, the rooms she had been given were too much like the rest of the house—pretentious and ornate to the point of being vulgar.

Miss Darcy gingerly touched a figurine on the bedside table with her fingertip, an enormous porcelain peacock accented with an

excess of gold leaf. Two facetted emeralds were inlaid for its eyes and less precious gems complemented its bright plumage. "My brother," she said, regarding the peacock with a frown, "once told me he found Rosings, and this room particularly, ostentatious and uselessly fine." She raised her eyes to Elizabeth's and blushed.

Instantly, Elizabeth thought of Pemberley, with its refined décor and simple but elegant furnishings. Everything in Rosings Park spoke of the perceived importance of its owner, and nothing of refinement and taste. Pemberley was a beloved ancestral home, not a nouveau riche showpiece. Of course, Lady Catherine's preferences would not be in accord with Darcy's. She repressed a smile. "Did he?"

Miss Darcy bit her lip. "He did. I hope my saying so has not offended you or caused you to think poorly of me, or my brother."

"Indeed, it has not," Elizabeth assured her. "Rest assured you are both safe."

"I am relieved to hear it," said the girl as the corners of her lips turned upward. "Forgive me, Miss Bennet. I am not usually so impertinent, but my cousin Richard reminded me you are my brother's dear friend and his, and that I have nothing to fear from you. Nor have I forgotten how very kind you were when we had the pleasure of meeting last summer in Derbyshire."

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat upon hearing herself described as Darcy's 'dear friend'. She had been dear to him once, but her circumstances then were very different from what they were now. If Elizabeth were dear to him still, Darcy would have renewed his addresses long ago. If he still held her in a tender regard, he would have fetched her from the parsonage in Colonel Fitzwilliam's stead or greeted her upon her arrival at Rosings. He had done none of those things, and the reality of his disregard pained her.

Attempting to sound more cheerful than she presently felt, Elizabeth said, "You were gracious and kind yourself, and I am delighted to have an opportunity to renew our acquaintance. Perhaps, once I return to the parsonage, you would be so good as to consent to take tea with me one afternoon? Assuming your brother approves, of course." Even as she spoke the words, Elizabeth could not imagine Darcy would ever approve of his sister, who had once suffered Mr Wickham's lies and duplicity herself, calling on her at the parsonage, or anywhere else for that matter. She doubted he would approve of their proximity now, at Rosings.

Apparently, Miss Darcy's opinion on the subject differed greatly from Elizabeth's. "I have no doubt my brother would approve wholeheartedly. He has often told me how pleased he was to be granted such an extraordinary opportunity to have you visit with us at Pemberley. He esteems you so highly. He has for a long time—since he first met you in Hertfordshire. Whenever he wrote to me then, you were often mentioned in his letters."

Elizabeth stared at her in shock. When she had stayed at Netherfield to nurse Jane, Miss Bingley had much to say about the lengthiness of Darcy's letters to his sister and the elegance of his hand; but Elizabeth was at a loss as to what he could possibly have found to write about her. She had been awful to him then—obstinate, argumentative, and impertinent to the point of being uncivil. Somehow, she managed to say, "Mr Darcy mentioned me in his letters?"

"Many times. Was I wrong to tell you?"

"No," she stammered. "Not at all. I am only surprised to hear your brother related anything of me to you then, as he and I were not so well acquainted with one another until much later." She offered the girl what she hoped was a favourable smile. "Of course, it is perfectly natural for him to write to you of the people he meets and the places he sees in his travels. I am quite flattered he found me interesting enough to mention at all!"

Miss Darcy returned her smile. "I enjoyed hearing about you. I am sure Fitzwilliam had not written of you more than twice before I felt as though I knew you myself. I was so happy when he informed me you were staying in Lambton, and so excited and nervous when he told me you were looking forward to making my acquaintance." She took a few steps in Elizabeth's direction and wrapped her hand around an ornate bedpost. "When you left so suddenly, the loss of your society was deeply felt at Pemberley. I hope that all was well when you and Mr and Mrs Gardiner arrived home—that your family was in good health."

Elizabeth was moved by her sincerity; it was impossible not to be. The remembrance of the disappointment she felt that day when she realised she would not be able to keep her engagement with Miss Darcy was vivid, as was the despair of knowing their short acquaintance—and her acquaintance with Darcy—was likely at an end. "I was very sorry to leave Derbyshire without bidding you and your brother a proper farewell. My family are all in excellent

health. In fact, my eldest sister is lately married to Mr Bingley. But you must tell me about your own family. Colonel Fitzwilliam has told me you and your relations are visiting Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh for Christmas.”

“Oh, yes,” said Miss Darcy, brightening at the mention of her family. “Our coming here was quite unexpected, but it is such a treat to see all my cousins together, especially at Christmastime. Uncle Carlisle’s estate is even further north than our home in Derbyshire—at the northwestern tip of Cumbria, beyond the lakes. It is a lovely place, as is Cousin Arthur’s home in West Yorkshire, but Fitzwilliam and I prefer the untamed beauty of Pemberley to the manicured gardens of Levens Hall and Rosings Park and London.”

“It appears we are of one mind, for I have never seen such beautiful grounds and woods as Pemberley’s. In fact, I believe I may even prefer Pemberley’s woods to Hertfordshire’s, which boast some of the most wonderful paths and picturesque glens I have ever seen.”

“I should like to visit Hertfordshire someday. Fitzwilliam told me how much he enjoyed exploring the country around Netherfield. From what I recall from his letters, he encountered you many times on his walks, and at Rosings, too, when you visited Mr and Mrs Collins last spring. I understand you are an avid walker.”

Elizabeth was flooded with contrition as she recalled meeting Darcy on her sojourns through Rosings’s grounds and woods, especially in the grove. She had cleverly—and mistakenly—believed she was warning him away from her favourite haunts by telling him how much they delighted her; instead, she had unwittingly encouraged his presence and his then unwanted suit. “Yes. I dearly love to be out of doors, even when the weather is gloomy and cold. I fear my poor mother does not know what to do with me, Miss Darcy. I am forever ruining my hems. It has long been a point of contention between us, for she is mortified someone might see me in such a state!”

“You must know my brother would hardly care.” A gentle smile played upon Miss Darcy’s mouth. “He would likely consider you to be as lovely wearing mud-stained petticoats as he would if you were wearing an elegant ball gown.”

Miss Darcy’s reference to her brother seeing Elizabeth’s mud-soaked petticoats at Netherfield when she had nursed Jane

mortified her. "Surely," she cried as a heated blush coloured her cheeks, "Mr Darcy has not mentioned that in his letters!"

"Please do not make yourself uneasy," Miss Darcy said in a rush, having the decency to blush herself. "The truth of the matter is that I have long wished to express my gratitude to you, Miss Bennet. Your love of nature and your enthusiasm for being out of doors have had such a profound effect upon my own happiness. Were it not for your adventuresome spirit, I doubt my brother would have granted me the freedom he has this past year. Where I was once cautioned against straying too far from the house, Fitzwilliam now encourages me to take long walks through the countryside—accompanied by a footman, of course. Like you," she said quietly but with considerable feeling, "I have found fresh air and exercise far more invigorating than taking a turn in a stuffy drawing room." She bowed her head as her fingers fidgeted with the lace trim on the sleeve of her gown. "It has done much for my peace of mind."

Elizabeth struggled to contain her astonishment. That her unfashionable country habits had inspired Darcy to encourage similar habits in his sister was as inconceivable to her as it was extraordinary. Again, Miss Bingley came to mind—proper, superior Miss Bingley, who relished declaring Miss Darcy one of the most accomplished and refined young ladies of her acquaintance. Whatever would she think of her friend now, boldly venturing beyond Pemberley's paved footpaths and into the wilds of Derbyshire—and with her brother's approbation! Elizabeth barely knew what to think herself.

The sharp succession of knocks that sounded upon the bedchamber door a moment later was jarring, enough to make both Elizabeth and Miss Darcy jump. Smoothing her skirts, Elizabeth's lips quirked upward as she met Miss Darcy's startled eyes. They laughed at their silliness, and Elizabeth crossed the room to answer the door.

A tall, elegant woman she had never before seen—but who she assumed must be Colonel Fitzwilliam's mother—awaited her in the hall. Sparing Elizabeth little more than a cursory glance, she stepped into the room as Elizabeth shut the door. "Georgiana," she said, "will you do me the honour of introducing me to your friend?"

Miss Darcy appeared both eager and happy to oblige her. When she had done, Lady Carlisle's pale blue eyes appraised Elizabeth from head to toe. "For once I see my son was not prone to

exaggeration. You are as lovely in countenance and figure as he claimed."

"Thank you, ma'am," Elizabeth replied, more amused by the countess's direct manner than offended.

"My sister-in-law is currently indisposed, otherwise she would have seen to you herself. She is excessively attentive to such things. How do you like your rooms?"

Elizabeth could not be certain, but she thought she detected a flash of something in her eyes—a keen spark of diversion not dissimilar to what she had often seen in Colonel Fitzwilliam's expression on the occasions they had dined together at Rosings last spring. "Lady Catherine's generosity knows no bounds. I am sorry to hear she is presently unwell and hope her indisposition will be of short duration."

"That," said the countess with a cryptic turn of her mouth, "remains to be seen. If there is anything you require, simply ring for a servant and you will be attended to. Breakfast is at ten o'clock and is served in the breakfast parlour. Georgiana will show you where to go. As you are already acquainted with Lady Catherine, you must also know how highly she values punctuality. I urge you to be on time, Miss Bennet."

"Yes, your ladyship."

Lady Carlisle's eyes returned to Elizabeth's gown. While the style was flattering and the velvet ribbons trimming the sleeves and bodice were pretty, it was not an evening gown, but one designed for morning wear. Nor was it new or considered au courant among London's fashionable set; it certainly was not as fine as the gown Miss Darcy wore. Feeling the weight of her ladyship's gaze, Elizabeth raised her chin. The urge to be flippant and enquire whether she passed muster was difficult to resist, but it would not do to offend Darcy's aunt, nor would she wish to make Miss Darcy uncomfortable. She kept her impertinence to herself.

At length, the countess gave a haughty little sniff, but her voice when she spoke was kind. "My son has informed me you have no lady's maid to attend you, Miss Bennet. I shall send mine to you shortly, and again tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. Should you remain with us longer than that, I will arrange for a maid to attend you for the duration of your stay."

The thoughtfulness of the gesture startled Elizabeth. She had not expected to receive such a singular attention from any relation of

Lady Catherine's, save for the few she already knew. She certainly had not expected such graciousness from Colonel Fitzwilliam's mother. "That is generous of you, Lady Carlisle, but I do not wish to inconvenience you."

The countess merely waved her hand in a dismissive fashion. "I assure you it is no inconvenience. In any case, we cannot possibly have you attending to your own toilette now, can we? Tell me, have you had your supper?"

"Yes, ma'am. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Darcy were so good as to dine with me at the parsonage before we set out for Rosings."

"I am glad to hear it. Richard speaks well of you and has assured me that Darcy has long considered you one of the most intelligent, estimable ladies of his acquaintance. That is high praise from my exacting nephew, Miss Bennet. I have never known Darcy to pay such an extraordinary compliment to any lady, and I have known him all his life." The corners of her lips lifted, revealing the hint of a wry smile. "I believe you will prove an interesting addition to our little family party here at Rosings Park." Having said her piece, her ladyship bid Elizabeth a good night, inclined her head to her niece, and departed.

Expelling a breath that she had not realised she had been holding, Elizabeth returned Miss Darcy's bemused gaze and sagged onto the bed with a breathless little laugh.



* * *

"Who is Lady Birtwhistle?" Elizabeth asked Miss Darcy the following morning, taking care to keep her voice low. They were seated side by side at the breakfast table, spreading copious amounts of jam on their toast. Despite the mantel clock chiming half past ten o'clock, no one else was present. "I had thought it was Lady Metcalfe who was to give the Yule Ball tomorrow evening."

"Oh, it is," Miss Darcy replied as quietly, glancing towards the door. "Lady Birtwhistle is her closest neighbour and oldest friend,

but Lady Catherine cannot stand her. She has three daughters, all of whom have set their caps at Fitzwilliam, which vexes my aunt to no end. They will certainly be at Lady Metcalfe's ball, which I fear shall make for an unpleasant evening for my poor brother."

Frowning, Elizabeth wiped a smudge of jam from her fingers with her napkin. Despite Darcy's alleged dissatisfaction with the attentions of the Misses Birtwhistle, there would be other ladies at the ball—handsome, eligible ladies whose attentions Darcy may not wish to avoid; ladies whose youngest sisters had not run off with a scoundrel in the middle of the night. Tamping down her own dissatisfaction at the prospect, she cleared her throat. "And there are three of them, you say?"

"Three of what?" Colonel Fitzwilliam enquired as he entered the room whistling a lively Scotch air. He bowed to both ladies, then stooped to kiss his cousin on the cheek.

"Three Misses Birtwhistle," Miss Darcy replied solemnly.

The colonel winced. "I daresay your brother will not be pleased to see even one of them tomorrow evening, never mind all three. Nor can I say that I blame him. They are without doubt the most tiresome bunch of...ladies." Chagrined, he coughed into his fist and turned his attention to the sideboard, where he piled bacon and eggs on a plate. When he had done, he claimed a cup and filled it with coffee. "Tell me, Miss Bennet, how are you faring this fine morning? I trust that you slept well."

"Quite well, Colonel, I thank you."

"And the bed?" he asked as he made his way to the table. "Was it comfortable?"

"Indeed, it was," she replied over the rim of her teacup. "Very comfortable."

Grinning, he placed his plate on the table across from Elizabeth's and pulled out a chair. "That is precisely what Darcy always claimed as well! The room itself may be fitted up for a spectacular fop, but rest assured you will sleep like a babe in that bed, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth flushed scarlet as she nearly choked on a mouthful of tea. Though Miss Darcy had shared her brother's opinion about the room and its décor the previous night, she had never once assumed it was because he had slept there himself. To distract herself from the provocative image of Mr Darcy in her bed, she took another measured sip from her cup and willed her flaming cheeks to cool.

“Are we discussing Stephen and his antics again, Richard?” a dull voice said from the doorway as Colonel Fitzwilliam tucked into his bacon. “It is too early by half.” The owner of the voice, a well-turned-out gentleman in his late thirties who looked as though he preferred to be anywhere else, perked up when he noticed Elizabeth. “Well, well,” he drawled, smoothing his hands over the lapels of his coat. “I do not believe I have the pleasure of being acquainted with this lovely creature. Georgiana, would you do the honours?”

Miss Darcy looked positively alarmed by his request. Elizabeth suspected it may have had something to do with the flirtatious gleam in the gentleman’s eye, or perhaps his eccentric taste in waistcoats. The fabric from which his was constructed bore an alarming resemblance to the bright, tropical drapery adorning the windows in the upstairs hall. The corners of Elizabeth’s lips lifted as she imagined an exclusive London tailor arguing with Lady Catherine’s curtain maker over bolts of colourful, garish fabric.

Beside her, Colonel Fitzwilliam snorted inelegantly. “Spare us your false gallantry, Arthur. Miss Bennet is sharper than a rapier. She has likely already discerned your sad state of affairs for herself.” Despite such a speech, he performed the introduction himself. “My dear Miss Bennet, allow me to present my brother, Viscount Emerson of Sallow Hall, West Yorkshire. Arthur, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire.”

Elizabeth rose from her chair and executed a brief but elegant curtsy. “It is a pleasure, my lord,” she said, arching her brow slightly as she resumed her seat.

The viscount bowed to her. “The pleasure is mine, Miss Bennet.” His smile was winsome, but it quickly turned to a frown once he espied his brother’s smirking countenance. Straightening to his full height, he fixed the colonel with an imperious, disapproving look that would rival any of Lady Catherine’s. “I see how it is, Richard. Despite your profession, you have no true respect for rank. Clearly, you are jealous I am first, while you must make your way in the world by playing hide and seek with Bonaparte.”

“Clearly,” Colonel Fitzwilliam countered, “you are delusional. Miss Bennet is a gentlewoman, and a great friend of Darcy’s. I could hardly disrespect her by introducing *her* to the likes of *you*.”

“A friend of Darcy’s, you say?” The viscount rubbed his chin as he regarded Elizabeth with a dubious expression. “Impossible.

Darcy is far too fastidious and disinterested to have such a charming friend.” He grinned. “Perhaps you would like to be my friend instead, Miss Bennet. I am not nearly so dull as Darcy, and I would pay you every civility in my power.”

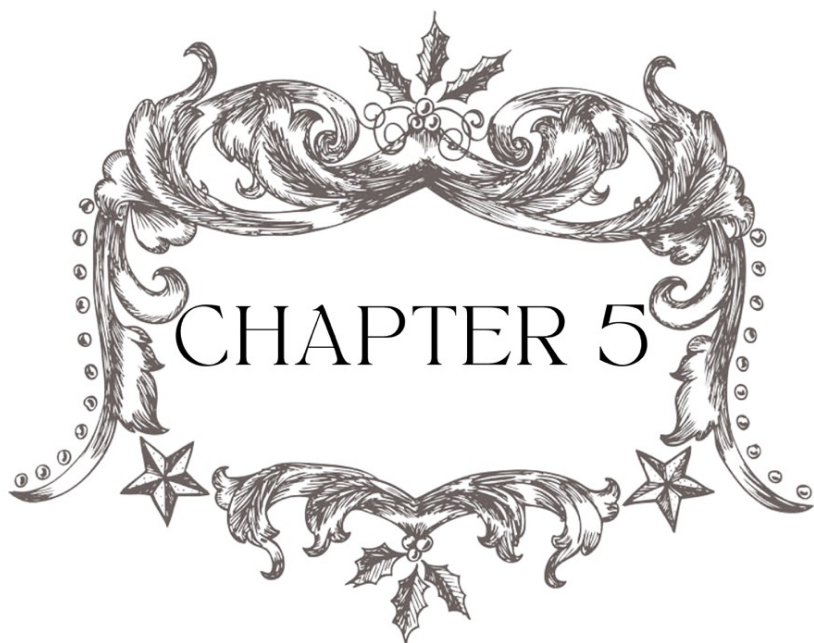
“Among other things,” Colonel Fitzwilliam muttered. Before he could utter so much as another syllable, Miss Darcy turned her large, innocent, blue eyes on the viscount and said:

“How is your dear wife, Lady Josephine, faring this morning, Cousin Arthur? I do hope she is well.”

Viscount Emerson’s flirtatious expression turned petulant. “Et tu, Georgiana?” he asked as his brother snickered at him. “For such a lovely young lady, you have an appalling lack of sympathy for your elders. Unfeeling girl.” He glowered at his brother, bowed gallantly to Elizabeth, gave Miss Darcy a saucy wink, and proceeded to the sideboard, where he bemoaned the lack of alcoholic libations with a dramatic flair even Sarah Siddons would envy.

Elizabeth endeavoured to conceal her amusement behind her napkin, with little effect.

The colonel looked at her and rolled his eyes. “Welcome to Rosings Park, Miss Bennet.”



CHAPTER 5

Surprizes are foolish things. The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable.

Mr Knightley, Emma

Darcy's head ached. To make matters worse, he had slept well past the breakfast hour, something he had not done since before he had reached his majority. As he made a valiant attempt to shed the brown coat that he wore in favour of his blue one, he repressed an oath of frustration. While the stylish, form-fitting garment flattered his figure, it was by no means designed with ease of removal in mind.

"Worth," he called to his valet, then winced as the sound of his own voice exacerbated the incessant pounding in his skull.

Worth appeared as though from thin air, effortlessly tugged the offending coat from his master's person, and assisted him as he donned the blue one. "Very fetching sir," he said in his even, dulcet tone, making a slight adjustment to the way the fabric lay across Darcy's shoulders.

"Thank you," Darcy murmured as he scrutinised his appearance in the mirror. Despite ten solid hours of sleep, he was exhausted, but thankfully no longer in his cups.

Damned Fitzwilliam and his illegal brandy. Such overindulgence was uncharacteristic of him, not to mention irresponsible, and the lingering effects—the fatigue, the dark circles beneath his eyes, and the harsh lines around his mouth—would do him no favours when he finally came face to face with Elizabeth.

Good God, I look nearly as disreputable as Stephen...

Groaning, Darcy dropped heavily onto a wingback chair, tugged at the knot in his cravat, and raked his hands through his hair, undermining a significant portion of his valet's efforts to make him presentable enough for company.

"Shall I retrieve the chamber pot, sir?" his man asked.

"No," Darcy told him. "I am well. I will summon you if I have need of anything else."

"As you wish, sir," Worth replied, and left as quietly and unobtrusively as he had come.



* * *

An hour later, Darcy stood on the precipice of a series of overgrown hedgerows that bordered Rosings Park's largest pasture. Save for a deer or two and a few birds, he passed his time there alone. It was the farthest parcel of land from the manor house and boasted a majestic view of the valley. The prospect was especially pleasant on a balmy summer morning, but it was December and therefore hardly warm enough to stand around in a dense snow-covered field contemplating his regrets and all that needed to be done to alleviate

them.

The insistent crunch of snow drew his attention elsewhere.

Not twenty feet away, wearing an ambiguous expression, Colonel Fitzwilliam regarded him from astride one of Lady Catherine's horses. The air was cold, and his breath resembled a white cloud of vapour. "Whatever are you doing?" he asked Darcy, guiding his mount closer.

Darcy indicated the tangled, unkempt overgrowth and gnarled branches with a curt inclination of his head. "Mr Edmontson was correct. This hedgerow will need rebuilding. Sooner than later if this pasture is to be used to graze livestock come spring. There is significant damage to one large section along the high ridge, and a few less obvious breaches at various intervals along the lower ridge. If you like, we can look at them now." He reached for his horse's reins, but the exasperation in his cousin's voice gave him pause.

"Never mind about the hedgerow. It is freezing! Why on earth are you looking at hedgerows the day after a snowstorm? Breakfast was four hours ago. Not only did you miss it, but you also missed a perfect opportunity to speak with Miss Bennet."

Darcy averted his eyes. The moment he learned that Elizabeth was a guest in his aunt's house, neither his mind nor his nerves had given him a moment's peace; thus, his decision to seek the benefit of fresh air and exercise before seeking Elizabeth. He turned his attention to the reins in his hand and examined them for signs of wear. "I hardly know," he said. He doubted such an answer would satisfy his cousin.

It did not.

Fitzwilliam swung down from his saddle and secured his horse's reins to a limb thoroughly choked by vines. Tugging the collar of his greatcoat to his chin, he forged a path to Darcy through the snow. They stood in companionable silence for some time watching small winter birds—robins, redwings, and finches—flit from branch to branch. "You are hiding," he said at length. "It is beneath you, Darcy."

"And I suppose you have come to expedite my return. The last time I checked, you were a commanding officer of the Royal Army, not a dog dispatched to retrieve a pheasant."

"Obviously, you have forgotten that hunting down deserters is part and parcel of my profession," his cousin replied, rubbing his hands together to generate warmth.

Darcy snorted. "Since when does doing Lady Catherine's bidding carry the same distinction as executing an order from the Major General?"

"Not even the Major General would trifle with her ladyship when her mood is foul. You know I do not relish being idle."

Darcy could not disagree. "So long as you have employment—and the work is honourable—your mission hardly signifies."

Fitzwilliam rubbed his forehead with his hand. In that moment, he looked nearly as tired as Darcy felt. "I am not here by Lady Catherine's design. I came because I am concerned about you. Despite your being foxed last night, it is unlike you to miss breakfast, especially at Rosings."

"Rosings," Darcy muttered in annoyance, "has become a bane of my existence. I never should have come."

"Nevertheless, you are here for the time being. So is Miss Bennet for that matter." Fitzwilliam's lips quirked. "You will be pleased to know she is holding up well in your absence. Georgiana adores her, my mother and Josephine, believe it or not, have both been welcoming, and Arthur is thoroughly smitten, though whether Arthur's approbation is in your favour remains to be seen."

"Wonderful," Darcy muttered. "That is just what I need—interference from Emerson. Please tell me he was not drunk at the breakfast table."

"Hardly," Fitzwilliam said with a laugh, "though your sister pointedly asking after his wife when he was attempting to charm Miss Bennet likely made him wish for a pint or two of small beer with which to swallow his slice of humble pie."

The corners of Darcy's lips lifted infinitesimally. "Remind me to thank her later. What of Miss Bennet? What does she think of Emerson?"

"Rest assured, she knows what he is, just as she knows what you are."

The hint of a smile Darcy wore slipped from his face. "And what am I, in Miss Bennet's opinion?"

"A good man," his cousin said with steadfast conviction.

A brisk wind whipped through the trees, ruffling barren branches and sending errant snowflakes twirling into the air. Across the pasture, a flock of blackbirds took flight. Their loud, cacophonous cries echoed through the stillness and quiet of the afternoon.

A good man.

Was it true? he wondered. Did Elizabeth consider him to be a good man?

As far as Darcy was concerned, earning her good opinion had seemed incomprehensible after he had failed her in nearly every regard.

But what of Elizabeth's perception of the matter?

For the first time, Darcy dared to consider he may have been wrong. Not only had they not seen each other for many months, but age and experience had taught him that people in general possessed a tendency towards alteration in the wake of distressing circumstances.

It did not follow that everyone became altered for the worse.

Elizabeth was not formed for melancholy. Her nature was inherently warm and her heart unfailingly generous. She was compassionate. She was teasing and sweet. Surely, if anyone could find it within their heart to forgive him for concealing Wickham's profligate ways from the world and nearly ruining her family's good name in the process, it would be Elizabeth Bennet.

Perhaps the possibility of redemption was not lost to him, as he had believed. But the question remained: if he did manage to gain her forgiveness, could Elizabeth ever come to care for him—could she ever come to love him—if only a little?

There was but one way to find out.

Steeling himself, Darcy thrust his foot into his stirrup iron and mounted. "I have wasted enough time," he told his cousin. "Let us return to the house."



* * *

Upon his return, Darcy intended to order a hot bath before joining the ladies in whichever room they currently occupied, but the moment he entered the house he found himself accosted by Anne. Thankfully, she appeared to be sober, but there was a tiredness in

her eyes and an anxiety apparent in her countenance that thickened the air around her like porridge. In a voice that was barely above a whisper, she insisted upon speaking to him without delay.

Against his better judgment, Darcy followed her down the hall, through several empty drawing rooms, and into the library, where he shut the door, ensuring they would not be seen by any family members or servants. The last thing he needed was for Lady Catherine to think he was proposing, or worse, for Emerson to think they were having an assignation.

As they stood beside the large window that overlooked the park, Anne folded her hands primly in front of her. Her face was pinched, her posture was stiff, and she seemed intent upon avoiding his eyes. Despite her insistence that she speak with him, she was taking a remarkably long time to do so.

Annoyed by her silence, Darcy tossed his hat and gloves onto a chair and removed his greatcoat. Anne glanced at him and blushed, then increased the distance between them by several feet. Darcy nearly rolled his eyes. Did she think he would remove his cravat and his coat next and ravage her?

Good Lord, what am I doing here? he wondered, turning towards the window with an abruptness that made Anne flinch. "I trust there is a point to your inviting me here, Anne, other than to admire the empty park."

Without further hesitation or ceremony, Anne blurted, "I cannot possibly marry you!"

Darcy faced her with a start. She had made a similar pronouncement the night before, but in a very different tone. Then, she had been drunk and giddy; now, she was as sober as he had ever seen her and had spoken in a rush, as though she had wanted nothing more than to expel the bitter taste of the words from her tongue.

She stood a little taller and lifted her chin. "I have an understanding. An understanding with another gentleman." She lowered her voice. "A gentleman of whom my mother cannot approve."

Darcy folded his arms across his chest. "You said as much last night," he remarked, trying and failing to keep his irritation with the entire business to himself. "Allow me to wish you joy, Cousin, for I harbour no doubts that you and Jack Hastings shall live a long and happy life together."

Anne made an indistinct choking sound. "Jack Hastings is a groom. I cannot possibly marry a groom. People will talk."

Darcy was barely able to keep his anger in check. "Then you ought not to have announced your desire to marry him within earshot of the servants! Hastings will likely lose his position, and your reputation and our family's respectability shall suffer for your appalling lack of discretion!"

To her credit, Anne appeared horrified. "Jack Hastings shall not lose his position," she replied with a veracity he had not expected. "My uncle has spoken to the servants. I suspect he paid them handsomely for their silence. In any case, he came to me afterward to...discuss the matter." Blushing furiously, she looked towards the window and stared at the park. "He knows the truth now," she said stoically, lifting her hand to trace an indistinct pattern upon the frosted pane with her fingertip.

"And what precisely is the truth, Anne?" Darcy demanded. "That Hastings is not, in actuality, the excellent kisser you claimed, and you have come to your senses based on that principle alone?"

"As far as I am concerned, Jack Hastings is not any kind of kisser! I have certainly never allowed him such liberties!" She covered her face with her hands and exhaled harshly, sniffing as she vigorously shook her head. "Oh! I do not know why I ever said such a thing yesterday! In truth, I have paid him little notice, other than to thank him whenever he had a carrot on hand to feed to my ponies!"

Darcy endeavoured to bring his temper under regulation. It would do him no good to have Anne reduced to a weeping, nonsensical mess. "It is well, then," he told her, tugging on his tailcoat as he effected an air of composure. "Hastings's position is safe, your reputation is safe, and neither you nor I shall ever agree to this farce of an arranged marriage your mother concocted. Pray tell her as much, and let us be done with this nonsense once and for all. I am tired of coming to this house and being browbeaten for failing to do that which your mother alone wants done." Believing that all discourse on the subject was now at an end, he bowed to her with the intent of quitting the room.

"It is not easy living in my mother's shadow," Anne told him, wiping tears from her eyes. Her voice was soft, but undeniably resentful as well. "Nor is it easy to live in yours. For years and years my mother has courted your interest and pushed me at you, and for

what purpose? Certainly not because either of us desired the match. It was too much! Your being here now is too much!"

She exhaled harshly, inhaled a slow, measured breath, and continued in a more reasonable tone. "I was...not myself last night, Darcy. Owing to that—and a generous amount of Cook's sherry—I said some unfortunate things about Jack Hastings that never ought to have been said. But I never kissed him, nor do I think of kissing him. The only gentleman I have ever allowed such liberties—or shall ever allow such liberties—is my dear Thomas."

"Your 'dear Thomas'," Darcy repeated with increasing trepidation and more than a touch of irritation. "Exactly who is 'dear Thomas'?"

Anne merely blinked at him, apparently disinclined to divulge more than she already had.

Darcy repressed an oath, pursed his lips, and paced from the window to the hearth, from the hearth to the couch, and back to the window. He opened his mouth to speak, then, after thinking better of it, promptly shut it and resumed his agitated pacing before he could berate Anne for taking up with the undergardener, the apothecary's son, or one of more than a dozen servants in service within the manor house bearing the same name!

"It is Thomas Birtwhistle," Anne confessed after several minutes of watching him stride back and forth from one part of the room to another. She smoothed her hands over her skirts and glanced nervously at the door, which remained firmly shut. "We have been secretly engaged to each other for two years. It is him whom I wish to marry, and no other."

For a long moment, Darcy could do nothing more than stare at her in flagrant disbelief. That Anne had been secretly engaged to anyone for two years, never mind to the son of a woman Lady Catherine detested, was as confounding as it was incredible! To his knowledge, his cousin had few friends and fewer visitors. Lady Catherine either approved or disapproved of each one, and none were admitted without her stamp of approbation. Unless the weather was fine and she could drive her phaeton and ponies, Anne rarely left the house without her mother.

And yet she claimed to be engaged!

He shook his head in consternation. Clearly, his cousin had managed to arrange assignations of some sort with Thomas Birtwhistle, the clever, surprisingly sensible elder brother to three

of the most infuriatingly persistent young women in Kent!

Despite having such sisters, Darcy knew there were worse men than Birtwhistle for Anne to have formed an understanding with. *Thank God she has not been having assignations with a groom!* He cleared his throat. "Does your mother know?" he enquired as composedly as possible.

The colour drained from Anne's countenance. "No!" she cried, glancing towards the door once more, then casting her eyes around the entire room, as though Lady Catherine might be lurking behind a bookcase, or beneath the couch, or a table. "Of course, she does not know. If I ever mentioned such a thing to my mother, she would ensure I never see Thomas again! You know he is a second son."

"Thomas Birtwhistle," Darcy replied calmly, "may be a second son, but he is hardly a pauper. He is in possession of an excellent living, not to mention he will receive a sizeable inheritance upon his mother's death. He does not drink to excess, he does not exceed his income, and he is not a philanderer or a heretic. He has devoted his life to doing the good work of the Lord. I daresay he would make you an admirable husband."

Anne's lips lifted in a smile, but it was a melancholy smile. "Thank you, but, on the subject of Thomas, my mother and I are not in accord. She detests Lady Birtwhistle with a passion, and Thomas and his sisters as well."

Darcy sighed and rubbed his forehead with his hand. "Lady Catherine detests Lady Birtwhistle because her daughters have all set their caps at me, Anne. Their interest undermines her own purpose. Do you not think her opinion might change if you were to tell her seriously, once and for all, that you have no desire to marry me?"

"It will not be enough. She is determined to have you for her son."

"Unfortunately for your mother, you and I have established that we do not have the inclination to wed each other, now or ever. There is nothing she can do to change our hearts. Surely, that must count for something."

Anne remained silent.

Darcy tried another tactic. "It is entirely likely your Mr Birtwhistle will attend Lady Metcalfe's ball tomorrow evening, you know."

Almost bashfully, Anne inclined her head. "He has asked me to

reserve the first set for him, and the supper dance as well."

"And I assume you have granted them?"

"I have not," she said, averting her eyes to her hands. "I have yet to send him my answer. You know my mother will insist upon your opening the ball with me, Darcy, and—"

"I have absolutely no intention of obliging her," he told her with finality, thinking of how fervently he hoped to engage Elizabeth for those dances, should she remain a guest at Rosings for the occasion.

He extended his hand to her then, and Anne, with some hesitancy, drew closer to him and accepted it. With solemnity, he said, "A man deserves the honour of opening a ball with the woman he has chosen to spend his life with—the woman he cherishes and esteems above all others. It will likely cause Mr Birtwhistle considerable pain if you refuse his request. You are seven-and-twenty and an heiress. You have been of age for six years. You need not remain under your mother's thumb even one day longer if you do not wish it."

Anne's eyes filled with tears. "You are correct," she told him quietly but feelingly as she tightened her grip on his hand. "I cannot possibly refuse Thomas's request, especially for the sake of appeasing my mother and her impossible hopes. No more shall I hide what I feel from the world. No more shall I hide my dear Thomas." Anne raised her chin defiantly. "I am resolved, Cousin. I am resolved to act in the manner which will constitute my own happiness and that of my future husband, without reference to Mama, nor anyone so wholly connected to me."

The corners of Darcy's mouth turned upward, and Anne returned his smile with a breathless little burst of laughter he had not heard since they were children. Seeing her happiness, and knowing it stemmed from being free of him to begin her life with a man who loved her, made Darcy feel lighter as well. Though it was not his practice to make any overt gestures of gallantry to ladies other than Georgiana or Lady Carlisle, in that moment he raised Anne's hand to his lips and kissed it.

From across the room, a barely audible gasp alerted Darcy to the fact they were no longer alone. Dropping Anne's hand as though it had burned him, he looked towards the door.

Elizabeth stood just within the room. One of her hands clutched the door handle; the other was twisted in her skirts. She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

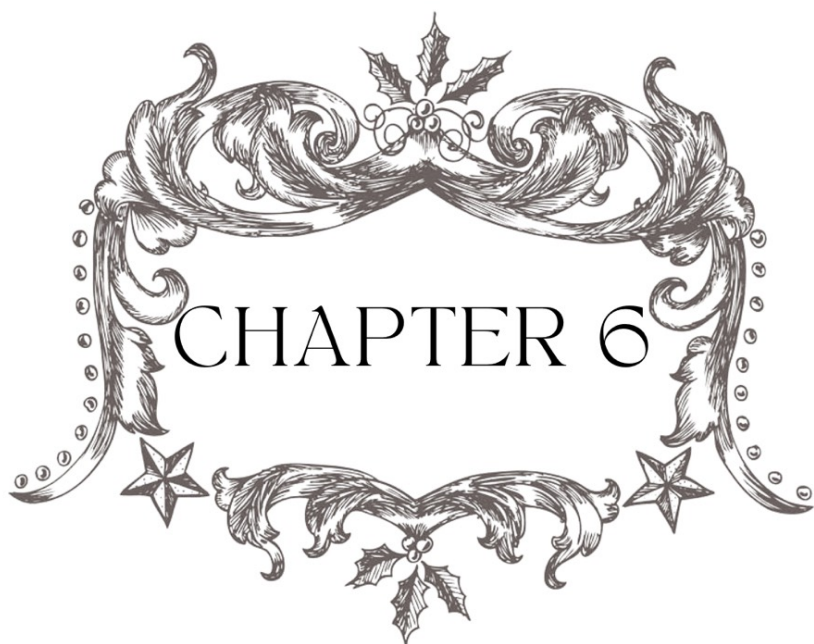
Darcy drank in the sight of her as his heart pounded in his chest.

Neither moved.

Neither spoke.

Neither so much as drew a single breath.

After what seemed a small eternity, Elizabeth wrenched her eyes from his. "Forgive me," she murmured. And then she left.



CHAPTER 6

Pray, pray be composed, and do not betray what you feel to every body present.

Elinor Dashwood, *Sense & Sensibility*

The book Elizabeth had intended to retrieve from Lady Catherine's library was forgotten. She all but ran from the room, intent upon putting as much distance as possible between herself and the intimate scene upon which she had intruded. Any emotional distance would prove impossible. In her mind's eye she saw Darcy—again and again—bestowing a tender kiss upon Miss de Bourgh's hand.

Miss de Bourgh's smile as she gazed at him had been radiant. Darcy's smile had been less so, but that he had smiled at all

pained her exceedingly.

For months Elizabeth had known he was lost to her, regardless of his generosity to her sister and all that entailed. He did not accompany Bingley when he returned to Netherfield. He did not attend Bingley's wedding to Jane. Through his avoidance, he had made clear he wanted nothing further to do with her. However much it hurt, Elizabeth was forced to make her peace with that. She was not so naïve as to believe that Darcy, to whom honour and duty meant so much, would live the rest of his life as a bachelor when his estate required an heir. Eventually, he would need a wife; but his choosing his cousin in her stead—a woman for whom he had shown no prior inclination or attachment in April—was as distressing as it was shocking.

Darcy was no simpleton. He was a man of the world—highly intelligent, discerning, and industrious. Beneath his staid exterior, he had a quick, dry wit and, Elizabeth suspected, a tightly reined passion. She had glimpsed that passion; she had seen evidence of it in his eyes at Pemberley. The recollection of that look alone was enough to convince her that Miss de Bourgh, frail and cross and so different than herself, could never make him happy.

But the private little smile Darcy wore in the library suggested otherwise.

How different he looked on this day than on the day he had proposed to her! Then, he had entered the room in such a fit of agitation Elizabeth had not known what to expect. She had certainly not expected his ardent declaration of love or the bestowal of his hand; nor had Darcy expected her swift refusal or her subsequent castigation.

Apparently, that was not the case with Miss de Bourgh.

Willing herself to keep her composure, Elizabeth hastened through a maze of rooms she barely recognised. All had garlands of rosemary, laurel, fir, and ivy strung across the mantels, and festive kissing boughs suspended above the doorframes. The faint sound of a pianoforte carried to her from the drawing room as Miss Darcy and Lady Josephine played a lively duet with more skill than she could ever hope to possess. She felt the hot prick of tears in her eyes, and moisture on her cheek. Irritated and impatient, she brushed it away with her hand.

Had her path never crossed Darcy's at Pemberley, where she had been granted the opportunity to see the man he truly was, his

transferring his affections to his cousin would have been easier to bear. But Elizabeth *had* seen him at Pemberley. She had gotten to know him at Pemberley. There, she had watched him conduct himself with perfect ease as he spoke with friends and neighbours and servants and villagers—many of whom had known him his entire life. At Pemberley, Darcy went from being a man Elizabeth had misjudged terribly to being a man she resolutely admired. Once she learned what he had done for Lydia, her admiration became much more—it swelled to love; a love that was now firmly fixed, for better or worse.

She entered the main foyer, where the grand staircase rose in all its glory from the centre of the space to the very top of the manor house. Its gleaming mahogany banisters, wrapped with bows and evergreens and boughs of prickly holly, loomed just ahead; but the purposeful staccato of approaching footsteps—a gentleman's footsteps—echoed through the hall behind her. Elizabeth quickened her pace and practically bolted up the carpeted stairs. In her haste to gain the second floor, she managed to tread on the hem of her gown. She pitched forward violently, landing hard upon her forearms, her knees, and the palms of her hands. The suddenness of her fall forced a sharp, startled cry from her lips. Her nose was mere inches from the Axminster carpet.

Darcy's distressed voice rang through the foyer. "Miss Bennet! Good God!"

Horried that he, of all people, had witnessed her spectacular exhibition of clumsiness, Elizabeth's cheeks flamed. She attempted to stand; as her feet were tangled in several yards of her morning gown, it was a task easier said than done. Unequal to meeting him with even the appearance of equanimity, Elizabeth untangled her gown with shaking hands and leapt to her feet. By the time Darcy reached the second-floor landing, she had reached the safety of her rooms.



Hours later, Elizabeth remained within the confines of her bedchamber, too affected and embarrassed to even venture downstairs for tea. She could only imagine what Darcy must think of her after such a ridiculous display. As if falling on her face was not humiliating enough, she had run from him as though harm would have befallen her had she stayed.

Emitting a short, humourless laugh, Elizabeth contemplated her plight. By all appearances, Darcy was an engaged man. How was she to face him with any degree of composure? Worse still, how was she to face Miss de Bourgh? The thought of seeing them together and wishing them joy when her own felicity would never come to pass made her heart constrict. If Darcy had not already announced their news to his relations, she suspected he would likely do so at supper. How in the world would she bear it?

In that moment Elizabeth longed to return to the parsonage. As Charlotte and Mr Collins remained confined to the village, that was an impossibility, not only presently, but for some time to come. She had received a letter stating as much from her friend that morning. Retrieving it from the little silver salver beside her bed, she opened it for what felt like the tenth time and read:

Dear Eliza,

All is well at the home of the Harkers. After passing a near sleepless night, Mrs Harker was safely delivered of her babe. Her labour was as long and arduous as we expected, but I am pleased to report her discomfort was quickly forgotten the moment she beheld her son. He is a hale, lusty boy, and both mother and child are doing well.

Now, I must beg your forgiveness, not only for my absence, but for abandoning you to shift for yourself in such dreadful weather as we have lately seen! Please convey my heartfelt appreciation to Colonel Fitzwilliam for having the foresight to insist that you accompany him to Rosings Park yesterday evening. (Mr Collins received word early this morning). I shall not mention my husband's opinion on the subject, other than to say that you, more than anyone, are aware of his sentiments regarding Lady Catherine's condescension. No doubt, he shall have much to say in the future, but I urge you to spare no thought for it now. Presently, the business has already been forgot.

Be not alarmed, but in his determination to hasten to Rosings this morning, Mr Collins happened to slip on a patch of ice while climbing into his gig and broke his ankle. Mr Harker, with the aid of his sledge and mule, was instrumental in pulling him out of the drift in which he landed. Mr Gooch, the apothecary, has since been to see Mr Collins and has authorised him to be transported no farther than his own home here on High Street, where we shall be forced to remain for some weeks until the ankle is healed enough to return home.

Do not worry for us, for Mr Collins and I have both been made very comfortable by our friends, as I suspect you have as well. Dear Eliza, do take every opportunity to enjoy yourself in our absence, especially if a certain gentleman from Derbyshire is in residence at Rosings for the holiday, as I suspect he may well be. You can be in no doubt to whom I refer, nor as to what my sentiments are on that score. Pray write to me when you can tell me all. Call it faith, call it hope, but I have every confidence I will see you happy and settled at last.

*I am as ever,
Your devoted friend,
Charlotte Collins*

Elizabeth flopped onto the bed and expelled a harsh breath as the pages of Charlotte's letter fluttered through the air and landed beside her pillow. Unless Lady Catherine banished her from the house in a fit of pique, her stay at Rosings would be of some duration. She stared at the canopy above her head and thought wistfully of Longbourn.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time to come to Hunsford and spend Christmas with Charlotte rather than remain at home, where Bingley had whisked Jane off to Scarborough to meet his relations mere days after their wedding. Though gratified to see her dearest sister happily married to the man she loved, the newlyweds were not expected to return to Netherfield until after the New Year, when they would stop in London for a fortnight to visit their aunt and uncle Gardiner. Having never been parted at Christmas, Elizabeth missed Jane exceedingly.

The Gardiners, who usually came to Longbourn for Christmas without fail, decided against making the journey to Hertfordshire a second time in as many months and headed south instead. Mrs Gardiner's aunt was aging and longed to spoil her young nieces and nephew before they grew too old to be spoilt. After closing their house on Gracechurch Street, the family had set off for Surrey.

Then there was the matter of Mr and Mrs Wickham, who were expected in Newcastle months ago, but who had come to Longbourn just after they married and had yet to leave. Despite a lieutenancy that awaited Mr Wickham in the north, the couple had been in no hurry to depart. Daily did Lydia make calls and receive her friends as though she had never disgraced herself and her family by running off with a lying reprobate. Her husband, as fond of society as ever, appeared content to avoid the responsibilities of his profession so long as he was able to gratify the vanity of his new mother, his sisters, and their neighbours. His condescension and false flattery, coupled with her intimate knowledge of his reprehensible treatment of Mr and Miss Darcy, made Elizabeth sick.

It went without saying that Mrs Bennet rejoiced in having her youngest daughter returned to her—and 'dear Wickham', too. Mr Bennet held a very different opinion; but to Elizabeth's vexation, her father proved remarkably disinclined to exert himself. He made no enquiries as to why they remained at Longbourn, nor did he issue any demands that they leave. Instead, he acted much as he always had by ignoring his household in favour of his book room and bidding no one disturb his peace.

When Charlotte had written that her parents could not travel to Kent for Christmas due to Lady Lucas having a bad cold, she had all but begged Elizabeth to come in their stead. Having no pleasure at home with the Wickhams in residence and Jane and Bingley from Netherfield, this scheme appealed to Elizabeth like no other. She sent her friend a favourable reply, packed her trunks, and was off within a se'nnight. Mr Collins's obsequiousness would be a welcome reprieve from Mr Wickham's insufferable presumption and Lydia's crowing about being a married woman.

Now, she was staying at Rosings Park instead, Mr Collins was injured, Charlotte must remain in the village to nurse him, and Darcy had transferred his affections to Miss de Bourgh. Only Shakespeare himself could have devised a more wretched comedy of errors!

When a sharp knock sounded upon her sitting room door a moment later, Elizabeth wiped tears from her eyes with a tired exhalation before hauling herself from the bed and smoothing her skirts. She had barely exited the bedchamber when Lady Carlisle appeared unbidden in the sitting room. Startled, Elizabeth blinked at her.

Without ceremony, her ladyship took her firmly by the arm and steered her to the nearest chair. "I understand you have suffered a fall, Miss Bennet. Sit down at once. You are pale."

"Your ladyship is very kind," Elizabeth replied as the countess claimed a seat beside her, "but apart from a headache and a slight rash from the Axminster, I am unharmed."

Lady Carlisle regarded her with a penetrating look that reminded her much of Lady Catherine. "You may be unharmed, but I daresay you are not yourself, my dear. If you were, you would have come downstairs, or at least taken tea in your rooms. You have done neither."

"Have you been spying on me, your ladyship?" she enquired, yet uncertain as to whether she ought to be amused or perturbed.

A complacent smile appeared on the countess's lips. "I have no need for such tactics when my nephew is apparently devoted to performing that office himself." She folded her hands upon her lap. "Darcy has been beside himself with concern for you."

Hearing Darcy's name caught her completely off guard, as did hearing he was concerned for her. Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat, but reason soon prevailed over whimsy.

He alone had witnessed her fall.

He alone had seen her distress.

Despite the fact Elizabeth had retreated to her rooms without assistance, Darcy had no idea whether she was injured or not. And, of course, there was her connexion to Bingley. He was Darcy's oldest friend. Elizabeth was now his sister. If an accident befell her while she was at Rosings and Darcy did nothing to promote her comfort in its aftermath, Bingley would be displeased with him. Elizabeth also knew Darcy's staunch sense of duty would revolt against shirking any such responsibility, real or imagined. Both his honour and his character would never permit it. She said, "Mr Darcy is the very best of men."

"On that we are agreed. There is nothing Darcy would not do for those he loves. There is no distance too far, no expense too great. If

it affords them comfort, whatever it is, he shall see that it is done.” Lady Carlisle paused and made a slight adjustment to one of her rings. When she returned her attention to Elizabeth, her demeanour softened. “He is very upset, Miss Bennet. I have never seen him more so. He obviously cares for you very much. In fact, given his behaviour, I am inclined to believe him in love with you.”

Coming from his aunt, such a statement was not only surprising, but impolitic. Elizabeth was at a loss as to how to respond. Though Darcy had once claimed to have loved her, she could hardly say as much to Lady Carlisle, nor could she mention anything of his involvement in restoring her family’s respectability, nor of his avoidance in its aftermath. Feeling all the frustration of her predicament as well as the full weight of her disappointment, she shook her head. “I fear your ladyship has mistaken responsibility and duty for affection. I have never known a more honourable gentleman than Mr Darcy. His friendship with Mr Bingley, who is lately married to my eldest sister, is of long standing. Naturally, such concern for me stands as a testament to the fraternity he feels towards my brother.”

This seemed to try her ladyship’s patience. “I have met Mr Bingley, and though I happen to know his friendship does mean a great deal to Darcy, my nephew’s present concern amounts to much more than you merely being the sister of his friend! As I mentioned last night, I have known Darcy all his life. I have seen him with women—I know how he behaves. To my knowledge, he has never shown any lady the interest—nay, the preference—that he has shown you. Yesterday, when Richard informed me that he believed Darcy admired you, I was sceptical. Today, I am sceptical no more. Not ten minutes ago, my fastidious nephew all but pushed me out of the drawing room and up the staircase in a fit of agitation the likes of which I have never seen. He marched me to your *door!*”

A heated blush suffused Elizabeth’s countenance. Chagrined and peevish, she turned towards the hearth, where the warmth of the fire crackling in the grate posed a stark contrast to Lady Carlisle’s mien. She inhaled a slow, measured breath, all the while reminding herself no good would come from losing her temper and making an enemy of Darcy’s aunt.

“Tell me this much, Miss Bennet. Do you care for my nephew at all?”

Elizabeth’s spine stiffened. Not only was the question intrusive,

but inappropriate. "Whether I care for Mr Darcy or not is inconsequential. I will say this much—despite what your ladyship believes, Mr Darcy's interest does not, in fact, lie with me, but in another quarter. As of this afternoon, it is firmly fixed."

The countess huffed in annoyance. "While I agree Darcy's interest is indeed firmly fixed, I disagree it lies in any other quarter."

Other than Lady Catherine, Elizabeth had never known a more officious woman! Clearly, Colonel Fitzwilliam inherited his stubbornness and intractability from his mother. Annoyed herself to be submitted to an inquisition by one so wholly unconnected to her, she blurted, "Since your ladyship claims to know Mr Darcy so well, she must also know he has lately proposed to his cousin."

"His cousin? Do you mean that business with Anne?" Lady Carlisle laughed. "That is nonsense! I thought you were smarter than that, Miss Bennet. You cannot possibly believe they are intended for each other. That is my sister-in-law's wish, certainly not Darcy's."

At this point, maintaining even the appearance of equanimity was a lost cause. Arguing had gained her nothing. Elizabeth's patience had reached its end. "I am well acquainted with Lady Catherine's wishes. It is generous of Mr Darcy to honour them. You may rest assured when he announces his betrothal to Miss de Bourgh that I shall wish them both every happiness." Her hands, like her voice, trembled. Abandoning her chair with an abruptness that caused the countess's eyes to widen, Elizabeth squeezed her fingers into fists and tucked her traitorous hands behind her back. "I must beg your ladyship's pardon. The hour has grown late, and I ought to dress for supper."

Lady Carlisle gaped at her with something akin to alarm. Elizabeth was surprised to learn it was not the result of being so rudely dismissed by an insolent girl of inferior birth. "You cannot mean to say that Darcy has an understanding with Anne! Upon my word, he would never consent to such an arrangement."

Perilously close to losing what little remained of her composure, Elizabeth tamped down the urge to give way to tears. "I should not have mentioned it. It is, after all, not my news to relate."

Lady Carlisle rose from her chair and said with some distress, "You are not well. You must calm yourself at once, my dear, or you will surely look a fright at the supper table!"

It was such an absurd thing to say that an incredulous laugh bubbled up from Elizabeth's breast. She quelled it at once and offered her ladyship a brittle smile. "My having a red nose at supper will not bother me half so much as it shall likely offend Lady Catherine. You need have no worries in that regard. By the time the dinner bell is rung I shall be myself again."

The countess regarded her with a cautious, somewhat dubious look, as though she believed Elizabeth was on the verge of losing her mind. "Be that as it may, I shall send a maid to assist you as soon as may be."

"Considering my rudeness, that is generous of you. Thank you."

The countess inclined her head. "If you were rude, Miss Bennet, it was because I was officious, insufferably so. I am afraid it is a Fitzwilliam family trait, inherited through marriage as well as blood. As far as I am concerned, all is forgot. I shall see you in the dining room at six o'clock and not a minute later." She turned and made to leave but stopped short of the door. "Do make sure your maid applies a bit of powder, my dear. Should you actually appear at the supper table with a red nose, Darcy shall likely send to London for his personal physician!"

When Lady Carlisle had gone, Elizabeth sank to her knees on the carpet and wondered how she would ever survive another moment, never mind an entire evening, at Rosings Park.



CHAPTER 7

Every moment had its pleasures and its hope.

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

“I shall never understand how you can pace the length of a room for half the day, Darcy,” Emerson drawled from the comfort of a wingback chair. He propped his feet upon a footstool fashioned from the foot of an elephant, crossed his ankles, and took a sip of tea. “It is dreadfully tiresome.”

Darcy paused before his cousin’s chair. “And I shall never understand how you can spend day after day, week after week, being idle. You have an estate, Emerson. You ought to ensure that it is running smoothly every so often, and that you are not bankrupting yourself.”

Emerson shrugged. "I have a steward to see to that bothersome business. He does well enough. As of this moment, I am not destitute...at least, I do not believe that I am." He squinted at his teacup and pulled a dissatisfied face. "Good God," he muttered. "Are these wretched looking creatures supposed to be monkeys?" He shook his head. "Who in their right mind would ever paint such abysmal specimens on fine bone china?"

"Lady Catherine painted them," Darcy informed him as he resumed his pacing, "before she married Sir Lewis. The figures depicted are human, by the way." At least he thought they were human. It was an appalling effort—the worst he had ever seen. A proficient painter her ladyship was not.

"Upon my word, I do believe these two are tugging...!"

"They are dancing, Emerson," Darcy replied in annoyance.

Slowly turning his cup in his hands, Emerson frowned. "I say they are monkeys, and monkeys do not dance." He tilted his head to the left, and then to the right. "Is that a pineapple or a goat?" He appeared truly perplexed.

"There is no telling what it may be, dear," Lady Carlisle told him as she entered the drawing room with alacrity. "Catherine has no eye for composition, no talent, and hideously bad taste." She glanced at Darcy and pursed her lips. "Tell me you have not been pacing the length of this room the entire time I have been gone, Nephew."

Emerson snorted and lifted his teacup in the air. Before he could provide his mother with a detailed account of his interpretation of Lady Catherine's artistic endeavours, Darcy crossed the room and said to his aunt in a low, serious voice:

"How is Miss Bennet?"

"Miss Bennet claims to have a headache and a few minor abrasions from the Axminster. I doubt they are serious." She walked to the fire, where the tea things were laid out on a lacquered table and proceeded to pour herself a cup of tea. Her lips lifted and she exclaimed, "Singlo! Thank goodness for small miracles. I cannot abide oolong, especially the way you take it, Darcy."

Darcy shook his head in consternation. He could not care less about tea; he cared about Elizabeth. "Do you have anything further to relate after speaking with Miss Bennet, madam?"

The countess settled herself on a chair next to Emerson's and regarded Darcy over the rim of her teacup. "She was upset, but that

is to be expected when one sustains a fall, not to mention the humiliation she must suffer for having been observed. She was also quite stubborn and impertinent. That, I did not expect.” She took a sip of tea. “By the by, Darcy, Miss Bennet claimed you intend to marry Anne.”

Emerson, who had just taken a sip of his own tea, choked on it.

“What?” Darcy blurted ineloquently.

Lady Carlisle rolled her eyes. “Really, Nephew. I did not mumble. I daresay you heard me well enough.”

Darcy sincerely doubted he had. Elizabeth knew better than to think he desired a union with his cousin! It was not Anne to whom he had proposed last April. It was not Anne to whom he had professed his love. “You must be mistaken,” he insisted. “I cannot believe Miss Bennet said any such thing.”

His aunt regarded him curiously. “What cause would she possibly have to believe otherwise? I doubt Catherine has kept her opinions on the subject to herself. She could barely keep her countenance at breakfast this morning.”

“I assure you Miss Bennet knows better than to believe any such claims from that quarter. She is neither impressionable nor stupid.”

“She may well be both,” Emerson observed unhelpfully, “if she believes you have set your sights on Anne. What a pity. I rather liked her. Oh well. There are always the sisters Birtwhistle.” The smirk he wore was insufferable.

Darcy glared at him.

His aunt clucked her tongue in admonition. “Not only was Miss Bennet adamant you are to marry Anne, but she was also equally adamant regarding your concern for her. She believes it is owed to your friendship with her brother—born of your fraternal affection for him rather than any notion of fondness you may harbour for her.” Lady Carlisle shrugged. “I did attempt to enlighten her, but she appears to be as obstinate as you are, Darcy, and would not hear a word I had to say on the subject.” She took another sip of tea.

Agitated, Darcy walked to the window as he contemplated all his aunt related and what it meant. By the time the setting sun had sunk well below the snow-covered horizon, he had arrived at two conclusions—either Elizabeth Bennet hated him with a passion, or she cared very much what he thought of her. Darcy fervently hoped it was the latter. If she cared what he thought of her, then it stood

to reason she must also care what he felt. The very notion of Elizabeth caring for him brought a smile to his face. His dearest wish—to have Elizabeth, whom he had loved for so long, as his wife—may yet be within reach.

He envisioned her at Pemberley, teasing him from across his supper table, smiling at him as she played his pianoforte, and welcoming him into her bed once they retired for the night. Children would come in time—intelligent, happy, dark-haired children as beautiful as their mother. Darcy could think of nothing that would bring him more joy.

Suddenly impatient to be gone, he turned from the window and addressed his aunt. “Pray excuse me. I have recalled a matter of significant import to which I must attend without delay.”

Emerson stared at him as though he had grown an extra head, but Lady Carlisle smiled almost smugly. “For such an educated, industrious gentleman, your discernment in this regard has been embarrassingly slow. Do get on with it.”

The hint of a rueful smile played at the corners of Darcy’s mouth as he bowed to her. He was not inclined to disagree.



* * *

After dressing for dinner, he waited by the grand staircase for what felt like a small eternity for Elizabeth to emerge from her rooms. When at last she appeared, she looked tired, but still every bit as lovely as she had hours earlier. He straightened, tugged at his tailcoat, and walked briskly through the hall to meet her.

Though she blushed at the sight of him, her steps did not falter.

Darcy’s heart pounded in his chest. There was so much he wanted to say to her, so much he wanted to do. He knew that he should greet her, or compliment her, or enquire after her health, but after passing much of the last four-and-twenty hours in nervous anticipation of this very moment, all rational thought had left him. Instead of a proper greeting, he blurted, “I am not engaged to my

cousin.”

Elizabeth stared at him, blinked, and then performed a perfunctory curtsy. “In that case, Mr Darcy, I shall say ‘good evening’ instead of wishing you joy.”

He was mortified by his total lapse of proper deportment but heartened by her flippant reply. Did he imagine her eyes widened slightly in surprise? Did he imagine a flash of scepticism crossed her face? Darcy had no idea. He was far too distracted by her presence to be certain of anything. He bowed to her and apologised to her and then he simply stared, intent upon absorbing every detail—her fine eyes, her blushing countenance, her pleasing figure, her lovely gown. Finally, he remembered himself, but instead of speaking sense to her this time, what came out of his mouth sounded far more like an order. “Speak with me, Miss Bennet. Now, before we suffer any further misunderstandings between us.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks flamed as she averted her eyes, no doubt as embarrassed by his untoward behaviour as she was by his suggestion. She glanced behind her, down the hall from whence she had come, and then towards the staircase. “I do not know where we can possibly go together without being interrupted or overheard. For such a large house, there is little privacy to be had within these walls.”

“There is a parlour on the third floor. It is rarely used and full of furniture my aunt has deemed insufficient for her tastes. If you are amenable, we may go there now. The rest of my family has already gone down for their supper. We shall not be disturbed.”

“Surely, our absence will be remarked upon by someone.”

“If anyone does happen to enquire, it is likely my aunt, Lady Carlisle, shall take it upon herself to relate a close approximation of the truth—you chose to remain upstairs, and I have pressing business which demands my attention. No one except my aunt shall ever suspect anything else. Lady Carlisle is the soul of discretion.”

Worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, she regarded him in silence for some time. “It appears you have given this matter some consideration, sir.”

“I have thought of little else other than seeing you, of speaking with you, for many months.”

Elizabeth inhaled sharply. This time, her incredulousness was plainly visible, and remained long enough for Darcy to take notice.

It was then, after months of denying himself the pleasure of her

society—of looking upon her and speaking with her—that he felt a pang of desperation in his breast that proved difficult to dispel. He angled his body closer, far closer than was deemed permissible, and quietly, but fervently, said, “Please, Miss Bennet. Will you permit me the honour of a private audience?”

Elizabeth held his steady gaze for some duration before slowly inclining her head. She did not comment on the double entendre of his words. She did not even raise her brow. “If you are assured of our secrecy, then I shall consent to speak with you, Mr Darcy. There is something I would say to you as well.”

Relieved she would hear what he had to say—that she trusted him enough to meet with him alone—Darcy offered her his arm.

After a slight hesitation, Elizabeth accepted it and they began their ascent to the third floor of the house in silence. It was darker there, with only one sconce out of every three or four having been lit, likely to conserve the expense of purchasing new candles.

The parlour was at the very end of the hall. Darcy paused to remove a candle from one of the sconces, then opened the door. There was no fire burning in the grate. There were no candles glowing in the chambersticks on the mantel. Without the candle Darcy had procured, the room would have been as dark as pitch. And cold.

While the satin evening gown Elizabeth wore was elegant and flattering, it provided insufficient protection from the chill in the air. Shivering, she rubbed her hands over her arms to generate warmth. “I had not imagined it would be so chilly, but in retrospect I suppose I ought to have known better if this room is rarely used.”

“It will not remain so for long,” Darcy assured her. He moved to the hearth, lit several candles and lamps on the mantel, and then knelt to tend to the business of starting a fire. With hundreds of servants at his disposal to perform every household duty, it had been years since he had cause to build a fire at Pemberley, but he was more than up to the task. Soon, a small flame flickered in the grate. Slowly, methodically, Darcy fed it pieces of kindling. When it was well established, he added larger pieces and several well-placed logs, and the little fire roared to life, radiating warmth and light throughout the room.

Elizabeth lauded his efforts and moved closer to the hearth, extending her hands towards the flames. “I did not realise building fires was a talent of yours, Mr Darcy.”

Dusting a bit of ash from his hands, he rose to his feet. "My father taught me the proper way to build a fire when I was a boy. It is a skill that has served me well over the years whenever I have found myself seeking refuge in abandoned hunting cabins during sudden storms. The weather can turn quickly in Derbyshire, especially in winter, and one ought to be prepared for every contingency."

Elizabeth glanced around the little room, where sofas and chairs and tables and all manner of trinkets and paintings were arranged in poor order. She indicated a table that had been shoved in a corner on the opposite side of the room. It was piled with books—atlases and encyclopaedias by the look of them. "If we only had some supper, I daresay we would be very cosy indeed."

Darcy silently reprimanded himself for his lack of foresight. He could have prepared a picnic for the two of them. They could have dined here together, on a soft rug spread upon the floor before the fire. "Miss Bennet," he began, but the look in her eyes and the expression on her face made Darcy fall silent.

"Please allow me to thank you first. For the unexampled kindness you have shown my poor sister. Ever since I learnt of it, I have been anxious to tell you how gratefully I feel it. Were it known to the rest of my family, then I should not have merely my own gratitude to express."

It was the last thing Darcy had expected her to say. He was stunned—nay, he was horrified—to discover Elizabeth knew of his involvement in the preservation of her family's good name. Deeply agitated, he turned from her and strode to the window, running his hand across his mouth as he fought for composure. If he were to propose to Elizabeth now, he had no doubt she would accept him. They would have a life together, and children, and everything Darcy desired—everything except the knowledge that her acceptance of his hand was born of affection for him rather than a debt her father could not possibly repay. "I did not think Mrs Gardiner was so little to be trusted."

Elizabeth crossed the room to stand beside him. "Do not blame my aunt, sir. Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed your concern in the matter and, of course, I could not rest until I knew every particular."

Bitter with disappointment, Darcy briefly shut his eyes. Before he could tell her that her family owed him nothing, that he had

thought only of her and of restoring her happiness—he felt the weight of Elizabeth’s hand on his arm. It was a brief touch, a gentle touch, but it seared his skin through his coat sleeve and the fine lawn of his shirt like a spark from a fire. He extended his own hand, wanting only to prolong the exquisite novelty of her touch, but she withdrew hers immediately and increased the distance between them to one infinitely more respectable.

“I know it is considered improper for a lady to raise such matters with a gentleman, but, taking into account your own candour on the subject, I can no longer remain silent.” She took a fortifying breath and, with some effort, confessed, “This evening, Mr Darcy, you informed me you are not engaged to your cousin, but I cannot see how that is the case. Though my intrusion upon your privacy was most unconsciously done, the unguarded moment I witnessed between you and Miss de Bourgh in the library was one of intimacy. Based on that—on the emotions revealed on both your faces, as well as the hand you held and pressed and kissed—I was certain you had formed an attachment and meant to marry.”

Darcy was about to object, to tell her that she was mistaken and that he could never marry Anne—that he did not love Anne; but the words lodged in his throat when he saw Elizabeth wipe tears from her eyes and turn aside her head.

It was not the first time his thoughtlessness and impatience had made her cry. The urge to comfort her—to embrace her—was overwhelming, but Darcy would not risk incurring her anger or losing her trust. Patience, not impatience, would best serve him now.

“Forgive me.” The corners of her mouth lifted in a smile, but her smile was fragile, and her voice sounded brittle and thin. She was far from composed.

“Of course,” Darcy murmured. He dared not say more.

Twisting her fingers together, Elizabeth expelled a tremulous breath. “Mr Bingley returned for Jane, but you did not accompany him. You did not attend his wedding. Your subsequent avoidance made clear your opinion that our society—*my* society—was no longer acceptable to you. While I did not come to Rosings by design, I had hoped we could at least meet each other as common and indifferent acquaintances.”

Darcy had heard enough. He would hear no more. “No,” he said, shaking his head vehemently, appalled she would ever believe he

could think of her as anything but his *wife*. “Never. There is no one’s society I find more acceptable than your own—no one whose friendship I have longed for as I have longed for yours these many months. I did not accompany Bingley to Hertfordshire, Miss Bennet, because I believed you blamed me for your sister’s elopement. Had I disclosed but a small portion of my dealings with him to your father, your sister would not have been so easily persuaded and preyed upon by Mr Wickham. She would not have been permitted to go to Brighton at all. Nothing less than my belief of your indifference could have kept me from you. Elizabeth,” he said with no little emotion, “did you truly believe that my love for you was so fickle? Or that you are so easily replaced in my heart as your statement implies?”


Elizabeth stared at him in wonderment. She opened her mouth as though to speak, but her lips formed no reply. Darcy noticed further evidence of tears upon her cheeks. She brushed them away with an impatience he remembered well from his time in Hertfordshire. “I thought you wanted nothing to do with me. I thought you had proposed to your cousin...I thought...I thought you had proposed...”

“No,” he told her gently, reaching for her hands and grasping them tightly in his own. “I did not propose to Anne. When you happened upon us in the library, it was after Anne had confided her engagement to a local gentleman. No one knows of it. I was congratulating her this afternoon. I did not propose.” Unable to bear her tears a moment longer, Darcy released her hands and drew her into his embrace, comforting her the way he had wanted to comfort her that summer, in Lambton. He pressed his cheek to her temple and shut his eyes. Her scent nearly overwhelmed him—orange blossoms and ginger and something sweeter. Something headier. Something uniquely Elizabeth.

When her hands slipped beneath his coat and found purchase around his waist, a lump formed in his throat. He swallowed it with some difficulty and said, “You must know the only way I shall ever be truly happy is to spend my life with you. If need be, I will drop to my knees and beg, but make no mistake—I love you as I have never loved another.” So powerful, so fervent, were his feelings in that moment, his voice shook. “Dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth! Do me the honour of consenting to become my wife.”

A tearful, breathless little laugh, and then a soft, but

impassioned, “Yes,” was all the reply he was to receive, but it was the perfect reply, and the only reply Darcy knew in his heart that he needed to hear.



CHAPTER 8

Family squabbling is the greatest evil of all.

Edmund Bertram, Mansfield Park

Hand in hand they made their way from the cluttered parlour on the third floor down to the dining room. Elizabeth could hardly believe the miraculous hand fate had dealt her. Not only was Darcy not engaged to Miss de Bourgh, but he was as deeply in love with her as ever. It seemed incredible that, in a matter of hours, she had gone from a state of hopeless despair to one of incandescent joy. Beaming, Elizabeth acknowledged she had never been happier. Judging by the smile on Darcy's face, and the way he seemed unable to bear taking his eyes from her, she knew he felt the same.

When they reached the second-floor landing, Elizabeth let go of

his hand, but Darcy snatched hers back again and raised it to his lips for a kiss. "Are you so eager to relinquish me, madam?"

Elizabeth shook her head at him, even as the corners of her lips lifted in a smile. "Hardly, but it would not do to appear so familiar before your family when they know nothing of our happy news. Poor Lady Catherine would likely suffer an apoplectic fit."

He laughed. "Indeed, but I have confidence in Anne. No doubt, she will soon do what is right to be done and announce her own engagement. Ours, I fear, will not disturb Lady Catherine nearly as much as her daughter's shall."

"Let us hope that is the case. Her ladyship has had much to say regarding the subject of Lydia's marriage. I do not relish hearing what she will likely have to say regarding my own."

Darcy's brow furrowed with an expression of concern, and he slowed to a stop. "Was she unkind?"

"She was frank."

"Meaning she was rude, condescending, and officious," he remarked irritably.

Elizabeth squeezed his hand. "Calm yourself, Mr Darcy. I would not have you give over your joy to anger. In truth, I cannot blame your aunt for holding such a low opinion of my sister, not after what she has done. Lydia was indulged and spoilt all her life. She showed no restraint, either in Brighton or Hertfordshire. Not only was she a willing participant in Mr Wickham's debauchery, but she left Brighton with him—she left the protection of the Forsters and all her friends—to elope!"

Pitching his voice low, Darcy muttered, "And my own sister, whose manners were everything they ought to be, nearly did the same."

"'Nearly'," she replied as quietly, "is by no means the same as having done so. Georgiana may once have been deceived herself by Mr Wickham's duplicity, but she has since seen the error of her ways. I can tell you with certainty my own sister has not. Neither has her husband. He flatters and flirts and makes love to us all, much the same as he ever did. I thank Heaven for Charlotte's invitation to spend Christmas in Hunsford, for I could not have tolerated spending another day in his presence. Rest assured, I will bear Lady Catherine's judgment and enquiries with fortitude if it means I am spared Mr Wickham's insincerity and lies."

Darcy stared at her with a look of incredulous disbelief. "You

cannot mean to say that he is in Hertfordshire now, at Longbourn!"

"They have been there for months." She then related all she had seen and heard from Mr and Mrs Wickham since they first arrived in her father's house. Darcy was livid, understandably so. He had paid an exorbitant amount of money to bring about their marriage. He had purchased Mr Wickham's commission. He had even settled a dowry upon her sister. In return, the couple had agreed to go to Newcastle, where Mr Wickham would report for duty a fortnight after their wedding. Instead, they had made themselves comfortable at Longbourn.

"He has likely sold his commission or lost it at the gaming table," said Darcy, his countenance dark. "I shall send an express to Bingley this evening and ask him to look into the matter."

"That is all well and good, but Mr Bingley and my sister are currently in Scarborough visiting his relations. They will not return until after the New Year."

"Then I shall go to Longbourn myself. I must speak to your father in any case."

"That, too, is well and good," said Elizabeth tartly, "but shall we not have some supper first, Mr Darcy? When your fancy carriage slides from the carriage shed into a snowdrift, I will be quite cross should you be forced to walk back to the house through a foot of snow in the dark on an empty stomach." She linked their arms and tugged him towards the staircase with a teasing smile. "Besides, I believe Lady Metcalfe would take offense if you were to go to Hertfordshire in lieu of attending her ball. I hear the Misses Birtwhistle, all three of them, shall be in fine form and desirous of a handsome partner to invite them to dance."

As soon as Elizabeth mentioned the Birtwhistle sisters, Darcy looked as though he had tasted something sour. Elizabeth made a concerted effort to conceal her amusement, but Darcy looked so dissatisfied and put out by the prospect of dancing with them she soon abandoned all pretence and gave way to laughter.

With an expression of hauteur that she had not seen him assume since the last time they were in Kent together, he said, "Laugh all you like, Elizabeth. The Birtwhistle sisters shall soon be family, yours as well as mine." He inclined his head towards hers until his cheek brushed her hair and said, "It is their brother, Thomas, to whom Anne is betrothed."

She could not have been more surprised had he confided Anne

meant to marry the butler. “Goodness!” she cried and laughed again.

By the time they made an appearance in the dining room, two courses had already been served. Lady Catherine was displeased by their lateness, Lord Carlisle was displeased in general, a gentleman whom Elizabeth had not met but understood was Colonel Fitzwilliam’s younger brother appeared half in his cups, and Viscount Emerson was rattling on about a horse he had purchased. Everyone else stared grimly at their food, pushing what Elizabeth surmised had once been a chicken around their plates with their forks.

It was nothing like Longbourn.

The gentlemen stood, and the viscount ushered Elizabeth into an unoccupied chair next to his own with a broad smile.

Rolling his eyes at his cousin’s gallantry, Darcy claimed the only available seat at the table, directly across from them.

The viscount settled into his own chair and spread his napkin across his lap with a dramatic flourish. “As I was saying, Miss Bennet. I had never seen such a beautiful horse in all my life. I simply had to have him. He is a stubborn animal, to be sure, but uncommonly fast and clever. The gentleman I purchased him from would not agree to part with him at first, but eventually I wore him down.” He winked at her. “I named him Napoleon.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam gaped at him. “Why on earth would you name your horse after Bonaparte?”

The viscount stabbed an overcooked carrot with his fork and shrugged. “Why not? It is as good a name as any other.”

“It is a *terrible* name,” the colonel cried indignantly, “not to mention unpatriotic! Bonaparte is the sworn enemy of the Crown and a clear and present danger to all of England!”

“Semantics,” his brother replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The murderous glare Colonel Fitzwilliam levelled at his elder brother would likely have felled a lesser man. “It boggles my mind,” he said harshly, “how I can possibly be related to you, Arthur.”

“And yet you are,” the viscount replied equitably, reaching for his wineglass and sniffing the contents within. “You must admit that of the two of us, I am by far the handsomest.” He took a generous sip of wine. “Would you not agree, Miss Bennet? Surely,

you have noticed how I stand out in a crowd.”

“Surely, my lord,” she replied archly, “you have heard the adage ‘pride goeth before a fall’.”

With the exception of Lady Catherine and the earl, all at the table erupted into laughter at the viscount’s expense, even the viscount. He raised his glass to her with a lopsided grin. “Well met, Miss Bennet. Well met, indeed.”

“I see you have not changed overmuch since you were last here in the spring, Miss Bennet,” said Lady Catherine. “You are still every bit as impertinent as ever. I would have thought your family’s recent misfortunes would have taught you some humility, not to mention respect for your betters. I see I am mistaken in that regard.”

A heavy, uncomfortable silence settled over the room as a violent flush of heat spread from the neckline of Elizabeth’s gown to the top of her head. In that moment, she could not decide what mortified her more: Lady Catherine’s allusion to Lydia’s impropriety or Lydia’s total lack of regard for anyone other than herself. One glance at Darcy told her all she needed to know of his own feelings: he was furious.

“Madam,” he said sternly; but her ladyship was in no humour to be gainsaid and provided no opportunity for him to say more.

“I trust, Darcy, you have solicited Anne’s hand for the first two dances tomorrow evening.”

Darcy’s angry countenance revealed he had done no such thing, nor was he liable to do so. Before he could articulate as much, Miss de Bourgh announced, “Everything is settled with Darcy, Mama.” She did not so much as lift her eyes from her plate.

Lady Catherine looked smug with satisfaction while Darcy glared at Miss de Bourgh and silently seethed. Apparently, his confidence that his cousin would do what was right to be done regarding her engagement to Mr Birtwhistle was sorely misplaced.

Colonel Fitzwilliam sputtered and coughed as he choked on his wine while his younger brother snickered into his hip flask. If the occasion required it, Elizabeth doubted Mr Fitzwilliam would be capable of walking from the dining table to the drawing room without falling on his face or into a wall.

“Stephen,” Lady Carlisle hissed at him, “you are at the dinner table, for God’s sake. Sit up!”

Glaring at his youngest son, Lord Carlisle slapped his hand

heavily on the table, causing Georgiana to flinch. "Sit up, boy!"

"Anne," Lady Catherine commented as though nothing untoward had occurred, "has perfect posture. Do you not think so, Darcy?"

"Have I mentioned my new horse?" Viscount Emerson asked no one in particular.

Lady Carlisle rolled her eyes. "Yes, Arthur. You mentioned your horse, several times in fact." In that moment, she looked so much like Darcy when his patience had been tried to its limits by Mr Collins, Elizabeth nearly laughed.

"I acquired him in Brighton, you know," said the viscount. "Have you been to Brighton, Miss Bennet?"

The moment the word 'Brighton' left his mouth, Elizabeth wished she could disappear.

Lady Catherine, in contrast, looked as though she had been handed a boon.

The viscount noticed nothing. "I daresay you would enjoy it immensely! Brighton is a ripping place. Very exciting. The races are simply marvellous! I plan to go back there come summer. Perhaps we ought to form a party." He turned to Lady Josephine, whom he had ignored for the entirety of the meal, and said brightly, "What do you say, my dear? Shall we have Miss Bennet to stay with us in Brighton next summer?"

Lady Josephine gawked at him, likely as taken aback by his suggestion as she was his address.

"That is very generous of you, my lord," said Elizabeth, "but I must decline. I fear the delights of Brighton hold little amusement for me."

"Nonsense," he insisted. "Brighton is nothing but amusement! There is sea bathing and horse racing. There are balls and parties every night, and the society there—"

"Is superficial and overrated," Darcy interjected with a terseness that made the viscount scoff. "Despite its manifold attractions, Brighton would not be to Miss Bennet's liking."

"By God, Darcy. You are a dullard," his cousin told him peevishly as he turned his attention to his dinner. "Should you ever marry, I daresay your poor wife will be bored to death."

"Anne shall hardly be bored at Pemberley," said Lady Catherine. "Will you, Anne?"

In lieu of a reply, Miss de Bourgh shovelled a spoonful of peas into her mouth.

Darcy's lips were little more than a thin, angry line.

Oblivious, Lady Catherine said, "I understand that you have been to Pemberley, Miss Bennet. This summer in fact, while your youngest sister was off cavorting in Brighton."

"Yes, ma'am," Elizabeth replied, making a concerted effort to remain civil.

"And how did you find it? Was it to your liking? Of course, it was to your liking," said her ladyship imperiously. "Pemberley is one of the most vast and prosperous estates in all of Derbyshire! It is a shame you were called home so abruptly and did not see much of it. Pemberley is very grand, though I have never liked that Darcy keeps it so wild. That will change once Anne is mistress."

Miss de Bourgh stared intently at her plate. This time, she had the decency to blush.

Darcy, it seemed, had finally had enough. "Your presumption astounds me, madam!" he told his aunt in a tone as grave as his countenance. "That you persist in your efforts even after I have told you—repeatedly and in the plainest terms—that they will never be realised is incredible!"

"There is something to be said for persistence," Elizabeth remarked, drawing the attention of the entire table, "just as there is something to be said for allowing nature to have its way. At Pemberley, I found there is so much to see, so much to please, not only in the grounds but within the house itself." She looked to Darcy then and held his steadfast gaze with an earnestness, a warmth—an affection—so deeply and profoundly felt she had difficulty containing it. Her lips lifted in a small, but heartfelt smile. "At Pemberley, I found much to admire."

An infinitesimal smile played at the corners of Darcy's mouth as he returned her gaze with equal warmth and feeling. "Do me the honour of granting me the first two dances tomorrow evening, Miss Bennet, and the supper set as well."

Lady Catherine raised her voice in protest, but her disapprobation was drowned out by the murmurs and exclamations of surprise and delight from the rest of her relations.

His forwardness was entirely unexpected and made Elizabeth blush; but in that moment, nothing mattered more to her than the expression of unadulterated joy in Darcy's eyes. "They are yours, Mr Darcy."

He rose from his chair and rounded the table to stand before

her. "Marry me before the year is ended," he said, holding his hand out to her, "so that *you* may be mine."

She slipped her hand into his palm, and he tugged her to her feet. "My heart has been yours for many months now, sir. I would marry you tomorrow, but I suppose marrying you before the year is out will do nearly as well."

Without ceremony, Darcy kissed her hand. His smile was brighter than she had ever seen it, and the steady, ardent look in his eyes was entirely familiar. Elizabeth could not be more pleased as he drew closer to her—as close as he dared in a room filled with his family—and refused to relinquish her hand.

Colonel Fitzwilliam leapt from his chair wearing a wide grin as he slapped Darcy's back, then embraced him with sincere affection.

Georgiana abandoned her chair so quickly it was knocked to the floor. Throwing her arms around Elizabeth in a fierce embrace, she confessed her joy in gaining a sister.

Viscount Emerson followed suit, as did Lady Carlisle and Lady Josephine, all offering congratulations and good wishes for a lifetime filled with love. The earl looked on with something akin to confusion while Mr Fitzwilliam, who was by this time well and truly foxed, raised his flask a few inches into the air and blinked at them. It was likely all he could manage.

Over the din, Lady Catherine's imperious voice demanded order, but no one obliged her. She grabbed her cane and raised it high above her head, but quickly lowered it as a gentleman Elizabeth had never seen before was shown into the room and announced by a footman.

Silence settled over the room.

"Mr Birtwhistle," said Miss de Bourgh in a breathless voice, rising from the table with alacrity. Her entire countenance suddenly appeared as though lit from within, and Elizabeth knew Darcy's dour cousin not only admired this man but loved him.

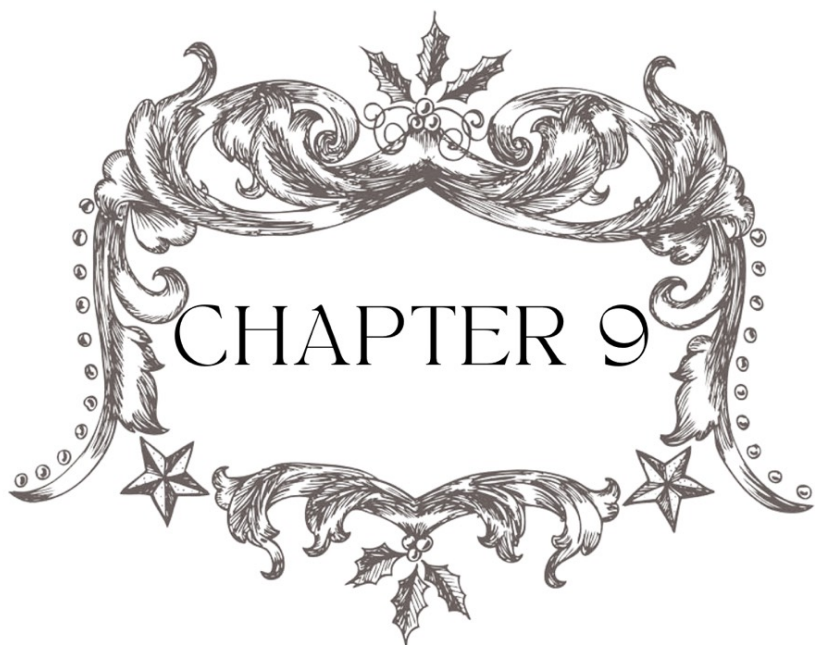
Thomas Birtwhistle's lips curled upward. "Good evening, Anne," he said warmly.

Lady Catherine gasped in outrage. "What insufferable presumption you have, Mr Birtwhistle, coming here and addressing my daughter in such a familiar manner! Such insolence and disrespect shall not be tolerated at Rosings Park."

By then Miss de Bourgh had crossed the room to stand before her betrothed, who not only accepted her proffered hand, but

placed a tender kiss on the back of it before pressing it against his chest, directly over his heart. Both wore identical expressions of adoration.

And then, before anyone could so much as utter another word, Lady Catherine muttered an unladylike oath and fainted face first into her supper for the second time in as many days.



CHAPTER 9

I will only add, God bless you

Fitzwilliam Darcy, *Pride & Prejudice*

“Good lord,” Emerson said loudly over the din of the musicians once Lady Metcalfe had taken her leave. Wrinkling his nose, he watched her push and shove her way through the great press of bodies packed into her ballroom. “That woman is worse than Lady Catherine! She prattled on so long my arse fell asleep!”

Fitzwilliam snorted into his cup of negus. “You have been standing on your feet the entire time, Arthur. What does your arse have to do with anything?”

“Damned if I know,” said Emerson with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Behave yourselves,” Darcy warned, averting his eyes from a

group of young ladies whose flirtatious glances and tittering not only made him irritable but uncomfortable. They could not be more than sixteen or seventeen years old. "Your mother and Lady Josephine are somewhere in this ridiculous crush with Georgiana. Emerson, if your wife happens to hear you speaking uncharitably of our hostess, she will drag you home by your ear."

"Heaven forbid," Emerson drawled, rolling his eyes heavenward as the music swelled.

"Speaking of being dragged home by one's ear," Fitzwilliam enquired, "has anyone seen Stephen? I have lost track of him entirely."

Darcy inclined his head towards the long line of energetic couples dancing 'The Young Widow' in the centre of the room. "He is presently engaged with my future wife."

Fitzwilliam's brows rose to his hairline. "I am all astonishment."

"As am I," Emerson remarked, raising his hand and gesturing to a servant bearing a tray laden with glasses of elder wine. "Miss Bennet is too good by half!" He selected a glass and gave it a subtle sniff as the servant hurried on his way. "Have you told her about him yet? Someone ought to tell her about the infuriating little fop before his hands find their way to her—"

"Emerson," said Darcy in frustration. "Do not try my patience tonight. It has been worn thin enough as it is."

Between Lady Catherine, who blamed him for driving Anne into Mr Birtwhistle's arms, the Misses Birtwhistle, who were as wild to see him as they were made desolate by the news of his betrothal, and Stephen, who had taken a sudden, alarming interest in acquainting himself with Elizabeth, Darcy's patience had been tried to its limits. His one consolation, aside from the fact that Elizabeth loved him and had agreed to marry him as soon as may be, was that Stephen was sober for once. It was more than Darcy could say about the youngest Miss Birtwhistle and her insipid friends. "By God, the society here is tedious," he muttered.

Fitzwilliam tilted his head towards Darcy's. "As much as I hate to agree with Arthur, he is correct. You really ought to caution Miss Bennet before my brother does something untoward, such as shocking her by recounting his assignations with courtesans, a certain lady patroness of Almack's, or the sisters of his friends."

Darcy sighed. "Elizabeth is neither blind nor stupid. Stephen was dead drunk at supper last night, and little better this morning. But

he did make an appearance at the breakfast table,” he admitted, albeit grudgingly, “and his apology for his behaviour sounded relatively sincere. As far as his dancing with her, I made every attempt to discourage it, but Elizabeth did not take kindly to my interference. She has a generous heart, a strong constitution, and a love of dancing. As much as I would like to do so, I cannot dance every dance with her myself.”

“Whyever not?” Emerson asked with a shrug of his shoulders. “She is your betrothed. There would be talk to be sure, but hardly a scandal.”

Fitzwilliam agreed. “It is Christmas Eve, Darcy. In less than an hour, Christmas will be upon us. You are newly engaged and in love, and this crowd is half in its cups. Save for Lady Catherine, I would wager most everyone in attendance is more inclined towards forgiveness than not, that is if they even take notice!” Smirking, he inclined his head towards one of countless boughs of mistletoe suspended over the windows and doorways. “Go, find your betrothed, drag her off into a dark corner, and give her a proper kiss!”

Though his cousin’s suggestion was hardly proper, Darcy felt the familiar stirring of desire. The prospect of holding Elizabeth in his arms and tasting the flavour of her lips tempted him like no other. There had been no opportunity to do so the night before, nor had preparations for Lady Metcalfe’s Yule Ball afforded them time alone that day.

A servant approached, carrying a tray overloaded with cups of negus. Darcy beckoned to him.

Emerson raised his glass aloft. “To Miss Bennet!” he announced with a broad smile. “May she fill Pemberley’s nursery with your children, teach you to laugh at yourself, and, above all else, make you happy!”

“Hear, hear!” Fitzwilliam cried, and both men drained their glasses at once.

Shaking his head at their antics, but smiling despite them, Darcy drank his negus at a more respectable pace.

Emerson spied another servant and waved him over.



* * *

It was nearly midnight, the room was filled to bursting and unbearably hot, and Elizabeth had reached the end of her patience with Mr Fitzwilliam. While he had proved an adept partner, he was without doubt an abysmal conversationalist and, she suspected, a libertine. If his eyes did not stop wandering to the neckline of her gown, she could not be held accountable for her actions!

Their dance ended and Mr Fitzwilliam bowed to her. His gaze, as it had for most of the night, darted to her décolleté.

Performing an impatient curtsy, Elizabeth forced a smile to her face. Before she could bid him a good evening, he brazenly reached for her hand. She evaded his grasp and tucked her hands behind her back, wanting desperately to be rid of him. He was the son of an earl, handsome, persistent, and young—no more than eighteen or nineteen at most—and likely used to having his way. Subtlety had proved ineffective, as had reminding him she was engaged to Darcy. Sending him on an errand seemed like the quickest method by which to accomplish her goal. “If it is not too much trouble, Mr Fitzwilliam, I should like a glass of punch. If you would be so kind as to procure one for me now, I would be appreciative.”

He inclined his head to her. “It would be an honour, Miss Bennet. Allow me to escort you to the refreshment table. I should like to hear more of your sisters in any case, especially your two unmarried sisters.”

It pained her to admit such a thing, but Elizabeth had liked him better when he was drunk. “Mary and Kitty?” she replied, repressing her annoyance as she feigned a congeniality she did not feel. “Whatever for?”

“Kitty,” he parroted, lifting his eyes to her face as he snickered like a schoolboy. “Surely, that cannot be her name.”

“Her Christian name is Catherine, Mr Fitzwilliam.”

“And you call her Kitty?”

“Yes.”

"How singular!" He laughed outright, but his laughter abruptly faded, and he frowned. "Miss Kitty does not resemble a cat, I hope." He appeared perfectly serious.

Elizabeth stared at him in disbelief. "No. Of course, not. She resembles my mother."

"That is very good to hear," he replied, and offered her a winsome smile.

Elizabeth wondered whether he had been imbibing, or had suffered a grave illness, or had been dropped on his head as a babe. She was still attempting to make sense of his odd behaviour when several very young, very attractive ladies emerged from the crowd, smiling and giggling and batting their lashes.

Mr Fitzwilliam's eyes followed their progress with interest.

As the ladies drew closer, their giggling grew louder and their looks bolder. Judging by the bright flush of colour on their cheeks, Elizabeth suspected they must have been in the punch pot while their chaperons held court in a corner or the card room, gossiping and sipping sherry.

Elizabeth was forgotten as Mr Fitzwilliam singled out the prettiest, brashest young lady in the bunch and tipped his non-existent hat to her. The girl's eyes widened, her smile widened, and she nearly tripped over her own feet. She blushed and smiled like anything as her friends laughed.

The entire scene reminded Elizabeth too much of Lydia and Mr Wickham. She was of a mind to depart and leave both parties to their absurdity but knew from experience that no good would come of pawning the rakish Mr Fitzwilliam off on a bunch of foolish young ladies who appeared to have had more wine than sense between them. "Mr Fitzwilliam," she said sweetly but firmly, recalling his attention to herself.

He appeared startled to see her standing beside him, her brow arched impertinently. "Miss Bennet," he stammered, then bowed to her. "How do you do?"

He was, without doubt, the strangest young man she had ever met; as she was cousin to Mr Collins, such a distinction was not awarded lightly. "I am thirsty, sir. I shall feel much better after you fetch the aforementioned cup of punch."

"Oh, yes! Of course, Miss Bennet. Your servant," he replied and departed at once, dodging several dozen couples as they formed the next set.

Shaking her head at his retreating back, Elizabeth wondered if he would, in fact, do as he promised and return with a cup of punch for her, or whether he would simply forget her entirely after becoming distracted by something or, more than likely, someone else. She decided it did not matter, turned on her heel, and set off in the opposite direction in search of Darcy.

After wandering the length of the ballroom, then the card room, and evading several gentlemen who were too inebriated to stand on their own two feet, she came upon Darcy in the Great Hall. A massive Yule Log crackled and popped in the hearth as flames danced and curled around its sides. It was the largest she had ever seen, a colossal bough of freshly felled oak that more closely resembled a tree trunk than a log. It was adorned with decorations—symbolic offerings and gifts—and smelled of green wood and a hint of elderberry wine as it burned.

Darcy was bent low over a table, scribing what looked to be a letter on a thick sheet of paper. Except for the two of them, the enormous hall was empty and blessedly devoid of the chatter and loud, raucous laughter that persisted in the other rooms. French windows bedecked with boughs of holly and ivy lined the outer wall, and music—a few lively strains of ‘Sir Roger de Coverley’—ebbed and flowed from the ballroom as happy couples danced and clapped and cheered.

“Shall I compliment you on your elegant hand, Mr Darcy, or the length of your letter?” Elizabeth quipped as she approached. “Or perhaps your pen requires mending. It is a shame Miss Bingley is not in residence to oblige you, for I hear she mends pens remarkably well.”

Darcy started at the sound of her voice and immediately laid aside his pen. “Forgive my inattention, Miss Bennet. I did not notice your approach.” His bow was formal, but his smile as he gazed at her was welcoming and warm.

Elizabeth returned it, but the sheet of paper on the table piqued her curiosity. She peered over his shoulder and read:

Arrogance

Conceit

Selfish disdain for the feelings of others

Improper pride...

Her smile slipped from her face. “What is this?”

Darcy snatched the paper off the table and quickly folded it in

half, then repeated the process thrice more, seemingly embarrassed. He cleared his throat. "It is as you see," he replied, staring fixedly at the little square of paper in his hand. "As tradition dictates, I have comprised a list of my personal faults, and the poor choices I have made throughout the year. I had thought to begin the New Year—and our life together—with a clean slate."

Many years had passed since Elizabeth had last honoured that tradition herself. Neither her mother nor father had thought much of writing their faults and offenses upon a slip of paper and tossing it into the Yule Fire on Christmas Eve. 'Codswallop', her father had called it, before pouring himself a glass of port and settling into his chair. He told stories instead, and drank too much, and Elizabeth and her sisters played the pianoforte, sang Christmas carols, and danced. At Longbourn, no one dwelled on their shortcomings at Christmas—or any other time of the year for that matter.

In silence, Darcy stood before her, his posture erect and his countenance impenetrably grave.

No, Elizabeth decided. Not grave, but penitent.

Chagrined, she recalled much of her own conduct over the last twelve months and coloured deeply. Darcy was not the only one who had faults to acknowledge, nor was he alone in making poor choices. A stack of paper, an inkwell, and several pens had been set upon the table for the use of Lady Metcalfe's guests. Elizabeth approached the table, pulled a sheet from the top of the stack, and selected a pen. "It is an admirable way to acknowledge the wrong we have wrought," she told him softly. "I have much to atone for as well."

Though Darcy had remained standing as he wrote out his list, he insisted upon fetching a chair for Elizabeth's comfort.

She thanked him as she sat upon it, dipped her pen into the ink, and wrote:

Vanity

Prejudice

Accusation

Blindness...

By the time she finished writing, her list extended halfway down the page, much like Darcy's. She folded it as he had done—until it was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand—and rose from her chair. "Let us both begin our life together with a clean slate."

They walked to the fire as the Chippendale clock in the corner of

the room began to chime the hour.

By the time it had chimed four times, Darcy had relegated his faults and offences to the fire.

By the time it had chimed six times, Elizabeth had cast hers in with his.

They watched the little squares of paper burn until both were nothing more than tendrils of ash and cinders amidst a host of bright flames.

When the clock chimed twelve times, Elizabeth slipped her hand into Darcy's, and he kissed it. Then they made their way to the French windows, where they could see the wide terrace and the garden just beyond the house had been meticulously cleared of snow. Beyond that, torches flickered brightly on each side of the snow-covered drive. A long line of sleighs pulled by sturdy, matched pairs stretched the entire length of it, awaiting the return of their mistresses and masters.

Elizabeth opened the door.



* * *

Outside, the air was as fresh and crisp as the night was dark. Darcy found it oddly, gloriously peaceful. There was no moon in the sky, no stars; the only light to be had shone through the windows—the incandescent glow of hundreds of candles in the ballroom and the Yule Fire crackling in the hearth in the Great Hall. He turned to Elizabeth and the corners of his lips lifted in a gentle smile. “Happy Christmas, Elizabeth.”

“Happy Christmas, Mr Darcy,” she said with quirking lips and sparkling eyes.

Darcy shook his head at her formality, even as he laughed. “We are alone for the moment. When will you dispense with calling me ‘Mr Darcy’?”

“When you give me leave to do so,” she replied as her teasing smile grew.

She was truly beautiful this evening. He had no idea where she had acquired the ball gown she wore—perhaps from Georgiana or Lady Josephine—but it flattered her figure in ways he dared not consider. Her hair, too, was arranged more elaborately than he was used to seeing it. One rebellious curl had come loose from the rest, likely while dancing, and brushed against her cheek. Darcy wrapped it around his finger. “Call me by my name, Elizabeth, please. I have longed to hear my name on your lips for a very long time.”

“As you wish, Fitzwilliam.”

Her voice was incredibly soft, as soft as her hair—as soft as the expression of her lovely, dark eyes and the sensual shape of her mouth. All had a profound effect upon Darcy. “May I kiss you?” he asked as softly, settling his hands on her hips and drawing her close.

She came willingly, sliding her own hands along the lapels of his coat until they rested on his shoulders. “You might have done so before.”

“There was no mistletoe,” he teased.

“Nor is there any now, but I do not believe we have need of it.” Her bottom lip was caught charmingly between her teeth.

“No,” Darcy agreed, gently running the pad of his thumb along her lip and tugging it free. He swallowed thickly and urged her closer, barely able to credit she was truly his. He was grateful, and humbled, and nearly overwhelmed by his love for her. The hand that remained on her hip urged her closer still, so close that Elizabeth was nearly pressed against the length of him. His other hand cupped her cheek, and, with unexampled tenderness, Darcy slowly trailed his fingertips along the column of her neck and the supple skin of her shoulder.

Elizabeth’s eyelids fluttered closed, and she shivered.

“You are cold,” he murmured, mentally chastising himself for failing to see what should have been obvious: Elizabeth ought not to be out of doors in such weather wearing only a ball gown.

“I am well,” she insisted. She withdrew her hands from his shoulders, slipped them inside his coat, and pressed herself flush against his body. “Kiss me.”

Darcy’s breath hitched.

Elizabeth had embraced him in much the same manner the previous night, but they had been hidden away in an unused room

at Rosings then, and she had been distressed and overcome with emotion. Now, they were in public, in full view of the house and Lady Meltcalfe's guests. If someone were to look out the window and see them, Elizabeth would be utterly compromised.

"You are overthinking this, Fitzwilliam," she whispered as she gazed at him, her entire countenance overflowing with acceptance and love.

A lump lodged in Darcy's throat as he returned her gaze with equal feeling. She would be his wife. In his heart of hearts, she was already his wife, and had been for some time. Let the naysayers and gossips say what they will; there was no one in the world Darcy loved as he loved Elizabeth Bennet.

She was fearless, she was guileless, and she had told him to kiss her.

Darcy desperately wanted to kiss her.

He should kiss her.

He would kiss her.

And then he did kiss her.

Many minutes later, when he reluctantly withdrew from the pleasure of her lips to catch his breath and cool his ardour, Elizabeth cupped his jaw with her hands, pulled him close, and kissed him again.

The End

About the Author

When she was five, Susan Adriani wanted to be an opera singer, but changed her mind when she realised she would have to perform in front of an audience instead of her bedroom mirror. She attended art school instead and became a graphic designer who spends more time writing stories and researching the social niceties of Regency England than she does cleaning her house. She has a teenage daughter who dearly loves to laugh, and a handsome husband who is not the least bit intimidated by Mr Darcy. She makes her home in New England, and cannot imagine a world without books, Google maps, copious amounts of tea, or Jane Austen.

Also by Susan Adriani

Misunderstandings & Ardent Love

"I have never been able to forget you...I am yours, in body and soul, for as long as I am able to draw breath."

AFTER MONTHS OF BROODING DESPAIR while Bingley prepares to wed Jane Bennet, Fitzwilliam Darcy realises he has no choice but to put his heart at risk and try to win the only woman he will ever love.

ELIZABETH BENNET WOULD MORE THAN WELCOME his return to Longbourn. Yet despite such mutually ardent feelings, her most beloved sister and Darcy's own uncle hold quite the opposite points of view.

TORN BETWEEN PERSONAL LOYALTIES and responsibilities, the couple must balance finding a discreet solution for a family scandal in London and dealing with new outrageous actions by Mr and Mrs Wickham, all while facing a Jane Bennet who cannot forgive Darcy his interference in her love story.

Can the two overcome misunderstandings and meddling and find their way to one another at last?

The Truth About Mr Darcy

The truth always has consequences...

Mr Darcy has a dilemma. Should he tell the truth about his old nemesis George Wickham in order to protect the good citizens of Meryton from Wickham's lies and deceptions? Doing so will force Darcy to reveal family secrets that he'd prefer never come to light. The alternative is keeping the man's criminal nature to himself and hoping he leaves the area before doing significant harm.

But as Wickham's attentions to Elizabeth increase, Darcy knows if he's to win the one woman he's set his heart on, he's going to have to make one of the most difficult decisions of his life. And what he ultimately does sets in motion a shocking train of events neither he nor Elizabeth could possibly have predicted.